Henry James

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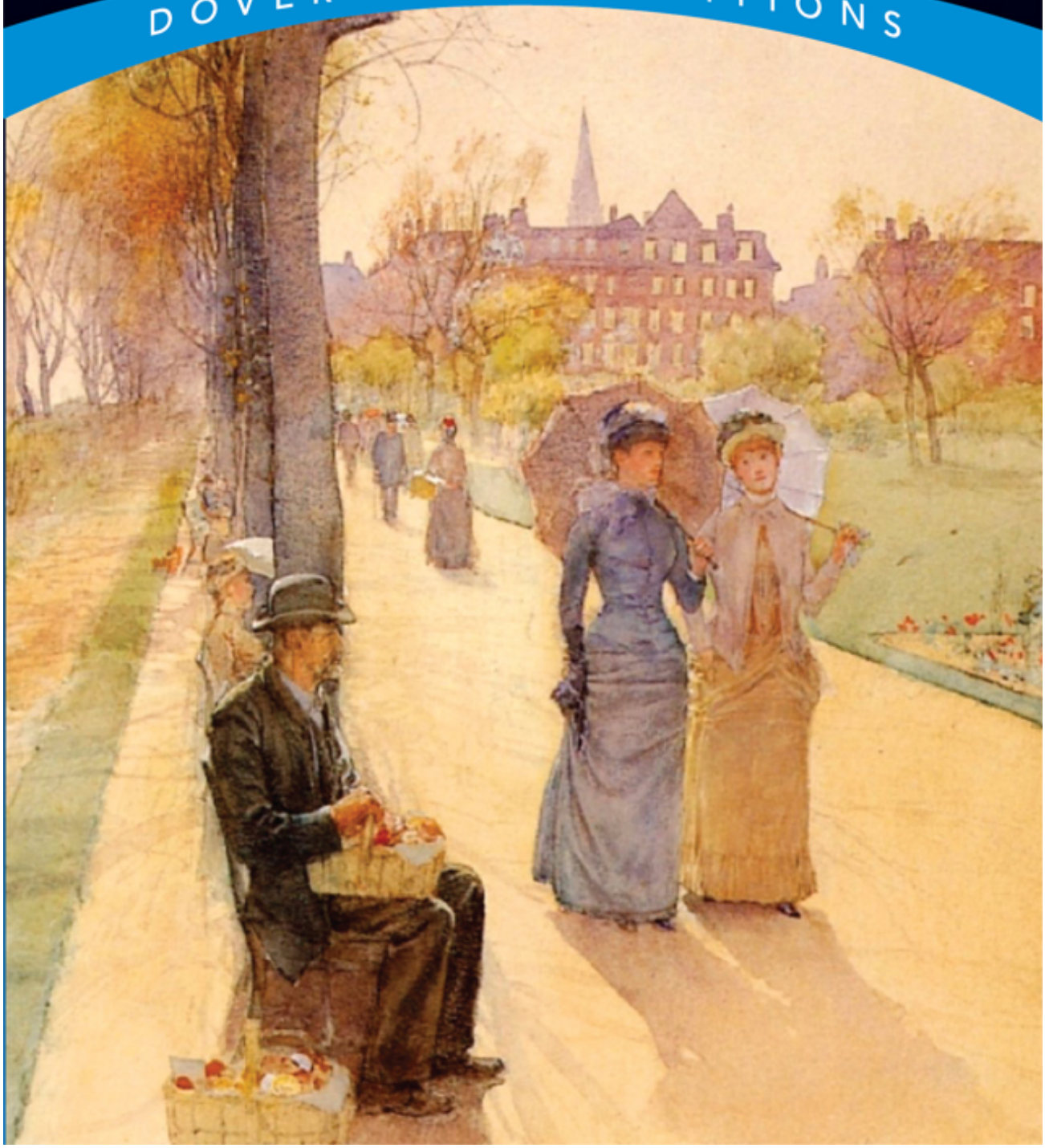
DOVER THRIFT EDITIONS



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THE BOSTONIANS

Henry James

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Note

The author of twenty novels and more than one hundred short stories, as well as essays and reviews, plays, two autobiographies, and various other works, Henry James is one of the foremost authors of the mid–to–late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Born in New York City in 1843, he was one of five children in the well–off James family. His older brother, William James, was a contributor to and shaper of the psychological and philosophical theories of the time; his sister, Alice James, revealed her troubled personal history in her famous Diary, first published in 1934 and revised and republished in 1964.

The James family moved often during Henry's youth, traveling to Europe in the late 1850s and living in Albany; Newport, Rhode Island; and Boston. In 1862, James began the study of law at Harvard, but he withdrew in 1863, intending instead to write (James received an honorary degree from Harvard in 1911). While in his twenties, Henry embarked on the "Grand Tour," and the European locales, especially France and Italy, made a lasting impression on him. He moved to London in 1869, and by the late 1870s had become enmeshed in the city's social milieu.

Traveling back and forth to Europe and absorbing the varied cultures, James keenly observed the contrast between the traditional lifestyle of Europeans and the more modern, "freer," habits of Americans. He drew upon this theme in his works *Daisy Miller* (1878), *The Europeans* (1878), and *The Ambassadors* (1903). In addition, James delved into the supernatural in the suspenseful stories "The Altar of the Dead" (1895), "The Beast in the Jungle" (1903), and, perhaps, his best-known work in the genre, "The Turn of the Screw" (1898). Other significant literary achievements of James's career are *Washington Square* (1880), *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904). Many of James's works, including the present edition, appeared in journals before being published in book form.

The Bostonians is one of two novels that James published in 1886; the second was *The Princess Casamassima.* In contrast to the European setting of the latter, *The Bostonians* treads the familiar territory of New England. First serialized in *The Century Magazine* (1885–86) and then published in book form in 1886, *The Bostonians* examines feminism through the character of Olive Chancellor, who lives in progressive Boston. Providing a counterpoint to Olive is her cousin from Mississippi, Basil Ransom, who represents a conservative point of view. James provides the plot's friction and romantic tension by introducing Verena Tarrant, a feminist who appeals equally to Basil and Olive. The triangulated relationship moves the plot, which also examines and satirizes topics such as humanitarian reformers and various late-nineteenth-century political movements.

Henry James moved to England in 1876 and largely remained there for decades. In 1915, he became a naturalized British subject. After experiencing a series of illnesses in his late sixties, James died of a stroke in 1916.

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THE BOSTONIANS

Book First

I

"Olive will come down in about ten minutes; she told me to tell you that. About ten; that is exactly like Olive. Neither five nor fifteen, and yet not ten exactly, but either nine or eleven. She didn't tell me to say she was glad to see you, because she doesn't know whether she is or not, and she wouldn't for the world expose herself to telling a fib. She is very honest, is Olive Chancellor; she is full of rectitude. Nobody tells fibs in Boston; I don't know what to make of them all. Well, I am very glad to see you, at any rate."

These words were spoken with much volubility by a fair, plump, smiling woman who entered a narrow drawing room in which a visitor, kept waiting for a few moments, was already absorbed in a book. The gentleman had not even needed to sit down to become interested: apparently he had taken up the volume from a table as soon as he came in, and, standing there, after a single glance round the apartment, had lost himself in its pages. He threw it down at the approach of Mrs. Luna, laughed, shook hands with her, and said in answer to her last remark, "You imply that you do tell fibs. Perhaps that is one."

"Oh no; there is nothing wonderful in my being glad to see you," Mrs. Luna rejoined, "when I tell you that I have been three long weeks in this unprevaricating city."

"That has an unflattering sound for me," said the young man. "I pretend not to prevaricate."

"Dear me, what's the good of being a Southerner?" the lady asked. "Olive told me to tell you she hoped you will stay to dinner. And if she said it, she does really hope it. She is willing to risk that."

"Just as I am?" the visitor inquired, presenting himself with rather a work-a-day aspect.

Mrs. Luna glanced at him from head to foot, and gave a little smiling sigh, as if he had been a long sum in addition. And, indeed, he was very long, Basil Ransom, and he even looked a little hard and discouraging, like a column of figures, in spite of the friendly face which he bent upon his hostess's deputy, and which, in its thinness, had a deep dry line, a sort of premature wrinkle, on either side of the mouth. He was tall and lean, and dressed throughout in black; his shirt collar was low and wide, and the triangle of linen, a little crumpled, exhibited by the opening of his waistcoat, was adorned by a pin containing a small red stone. In spite of this decoration the young man looked poor—as poor as a young man could look who had such a fine head and such magnificent eyes. Those of Basil Ransom were dark, deep, and glowing; his head had a character of elevation which fairly added to his stature; it was a head to be seen above the level of a crowd, on some judicial bench or political platform, or even on a bronze medal. His forehead was high and broad, and his thick black hair, perfectly straight and glossy, and without any division, rolled back from it in a leonine manner. These things, the eyes especially, with their smouldering fire, might have indicated that he was to be a great American statesman; or, on the other hand, they might simply have proved that he came from Carolina or Alabama. He came, in fact, from Mississippi, and he spoke very perceptibly with the accent of that country. It is not in my power to reproduce by any combination of characters this charming dialect; but the initiated reader will have no difficulty in evoking the sound, which is to be associated in the present instance with nothing vulgar or vain. This lean, pale, sallow, shabby, striking young man, with his superior head, his sedentary shoulders, his expression of bright grimness and hard enthusiasm, his provincial, distinguished appearance, is, as a representative of his sex, the most important personage in my narrative; he played a very active part in the events I have undertaken in some degree to set forth. And yet the reader who likes a complete image, who desires to read with the senses as well as with the reason, is entreated not to forget that he prolonged his consonants and swallowed his vowels, that he was guilty of elisions and interpolations which were equally unexpected, and that his discourse was pervaded by something sultry and vast, something almost African in its rich, basking tone, something that suggested the teeming expanse of the cotton field. Mrs. Luna looked up at all this, but saw only a part of it; otherwise she would not have replied in a bantering manner, in answer to his inquiry: "Are you ever different from this?" Mrs. Luna was familiar—intolerably familiar.

Basil Ransom colored a little. Then he said: "Oh yes; when I dine out I usually carry a six-shooter and a bowie knife." And he took up his hat vaguely—a soft black hat with a low crown and an immense straight brim. Mrs. Luna wanted to know what he was doing. She made him sit down; she assured him that her sister quite expected him, would feel as sorry as she could ever feel for anything—for she was a kind of fatalist, anyhow—if he didn't stay to dinner. It was an immense pity—she herself was going out; in Boston you must jump at invitations. Olive, too, was going somewhere after dinner, but he mustn't mind that; perhaps he would like to go with her. It wasn't a party—Olive didn't go to parties; it was one of those weird meetings she was so fond of.

"What kind of meetings do you refer to? You speak as if it were a rendezvous of witches on the

Brocken."

"Well, so it is; they are all witches and wizards, mediums, and spirit-rappers, and roaring radicals."

Basil Ransom stared; the yellow light in his brown eyes deepened. "Do you mean to say your sister's a roaring radical?"

"A radical? She's a female Jacobin—she's a nihilist. Whatever is, is wrong, and all that sort of thing. If you are going to dine with her, you had better know it."

"Oh, murder!" murmured the young man vaguely, sinking back in his chair with his arms folded. He looked at Mrs. Luna with intelligent incredulity. She was sufficiently pretty; her hair was in clusters of curls, like bunches of grapes; her tight bodice seemed to crack with her vivacity; and from beneath the stiff little plaits of her petticoat a small fat foot protruded, resting upon a stilted heel. She was attractive and impertinent, especially the latter. He seemed to think it was a great pity, what she had told him; but he lost himself in this consideration, or, at any rate, said nothing for some time, while his eyes wandered over Mrs. Luna, and he probably wondered what body of doctrine *she* represented, little as she might partake of the nature of her sister. Many things were strange to Basil Ransom; Boston especially was strewn with surprises, and he was a man who liked to understand. Mrs. Luna was drawing on her gloves; Ransom had never seen any that were so long; they reminded him of stockings, and he wondered how she managed without garters above the elbow. "Well, I suppose I might have known that," he continued, at last.

"You might have known what?"

"Well, that Miss Chancellor would be all that you say. She was brought up in the city of reform."

"Oh, it isn't the city; it's just Olive Chancellor. She would reform the solar system if she could get hold of it. She'll reform you, if you don't look out. That's the way I found her when I returned from Europe."

"Have you been in Europe?" Ransom asked.

"Mercy, yes! Haven't you?"

"No, I haven't been anywhere. Has your sister?"

"Yes; but she stayed only an hour or two. She hates it; she would like to abolish it. Didn't you know I had been to Europe?" Mrs. Luna went on, in the slightly aggrieved tone of a woman who discovers the limits of her reputation.

Ransom reflected he might answer her that until five minutes ago he didn't know she existed; but he remembered that this was not the way in which a Southern gentleman spoke to ladies, and he contented himself with saying that he must condone his Boeotion ignorance (he was fond of an elegant phrase) ; that he lived in a part of the country where they didn't think much about Europe, and that he had always supposed she was domiciled in New York. This last remark he made at a venture, for he had, naturally, not devoted any supposition whatever to Mrs. Luna. His dishonesty, however, only exposed him the more.

"If you thought I lived in New York, why in the world didn't you come and see me?" the lady inquired.

"Well, you see, I don't go out much, except to the courts."

"Do you mean the law-courts? Everyone has got some profession over here! Are you very ambitious? You look as if you were."

"Yes, very," Basil Ransom replied, with a smile, and the curious feminine softness with which Southern gentlemen enunciate that adverb.

Mrs. Luna explained that she had been living in Europe for several years—ever since her husband died—but had come home a month before, come home with her little boy, the only thing she had in the world, and was paying a visit to her sister, who, of course, was the nearest thing after the child. "But it isn't the same," she said. "Olive and I disagree so much."

"While you and your little boy don't," the young man remarked.

"Oh no, I never differ from Newton!" And Mrs. Luna added that now she was back she didn't know what she should do. That was the worst of coming back; it was like being born again, at one's age—one had to begin life afresh. One didn't even know what one had come back for. There were people who wanted one to spend the winter in Boston; but she couldn't stand that—she knew, at least, what she had not come back for. Perhaps she should take a house in Washington; did he ever hear of that little place? They had invented it while she was away. Besides, Olive didn't want her in Boston, and didn't go through the form of saying so. That was one comfort with Olive; she never went through any forms.

Basil Ransom had got up just as Mrs. Luna made this last declaration; for a young lady had glided into the room, who stopped short as it fell upon her ears. She stood there looking, consciously and rather seriously, at Mr. Ransom; a smile of exceeding faintness played about her lips—it was just perceptible enough to light up the native gravity of her face. It might have been likened to a thin ray of moonlight resting upon the wall of a prison.

"If that were true," she said, "I shouldn't tell you that I am very sorry to have kept you waiting."

Her voice was low and agreeable—a cultivated voice—and she extended a slender white hand to her visitor, who remarked with some solemnity (he felt a certain guilt of participation in Mrs. Luna's indiscretion) that he was intensely happy to make her acquaintance. He observed that Miss Chancellor's hand was at once cold and limp; she merely placed it in his, without exerting the smallest pressure. Mrs.

Luna explained to her sister that her freedom of speech was caused by his being a relation—though, indeed, he didn't seem to know much about them. She didn't believe he had ever heard of her, Mrs. Luna, though he pretended, with his Southern chivalry, that he had. She must be off to her dinner now, she saw the carriage was there, and in her absence Olive might give any version of her she chose.

"I have told him you are a radical, and you may tell him, if you like, that I am a painted Jezebel. Try to reform him; a person from Mississippi is sure to be all wrong. I shall be back very late; we are going to a theatre–party; that's why we dine so early. Good-bye, Mr. Ransom," Mrs. Luna continued, gathering up the feathery white shawl which added to the volume of her fairness. "I hope you are going to stay a little, so that you may judge us for yourself. I should like you to see Newton, too; he is a noble little nature, and I want some advice about him. You only stay to-morrow? Why, what's the use of that? Well, mind you come and see me in New York; I shall be sure to be part of the winter there. I shall send you a card; I won't let you off. Don't come out; my sister has the first claim. Olive, why don't you take him to your female convention?" Mrs. Luna's familiarity extended even to her sister; she remarked to Miss Chancellor that she looked as if she were got up for a sea-voyage. "I am glad I haven't opinions that prevent my dressing in the evening!" she declared from the doorway. "The amount of thought they give to their clothing, the people who are afraid of looking frivolous!"

Whether much or little consideration had been directed to the result, Miss Chancellor certainly would not have incurred this reproach. She was habited in a plain dark dress, without any ornaments, and her smooth, colorless hair was confined as carefully as that of her sister was encouraged to stray. She had instantly seated herself, and while Mrs. Luna talked she kept her eyes on the ground, glancing even less toward Basil Ransom than toward that woman of many words. The young man was therefore free to look at her; a contemplation which showed him that she was agitated and trying to conceal it. He wondered why she was agitated, not foreseeing that he was destined to discover, later, that her nature was like a skiff in a stormy sea. Even after her sister had passed out of the room she sat there with her eyes turned away, as if there had been a spell upon her which forbade her to raise them. Miss Olive Chancellor, it may be confided to the reader, to whom in the course of our history I shall be under the necessity of imparting much occult information, was subject to fits of tragic shyness, during which she was unable to meet even her own eyes in the mirror. One of these fits had suddenly seized her now, without any obvious cause, though, indeed, Mrs. Luna had made it worse by becoming instantly so personal. There was nothing in the world so personal as Mrs. Luna; her sister could have hated her for it if she had not forbidden herself this emotion as directed to individuals. Basil Ransom was a young man of first-rate intelligence, but conscious of the narrow range, as yet, of his experience. He was on his guard against generalizations which might be hasty; but he had arrived at two or three that were of value to a gentleman lately admitted to the New York bar and looking out for clients. One of them was to the effect that the simplest division it is possible to make of the human race is into the people who take things hard and the people who take them easy. He perceived very quickly that Miss Chancellor belonged to the former class. This was written so intensely in her delicate face that he felt an unformulated pity for her before they had exchanged twenty words. He himself, by nature, took things easy; if he had put on the screw of late, it was after reflection, and because circumstances pressed him close. But this pale girl, with her light-green eyes, her pointed features and nervous manner, was visibly morbid; it was as plain as day that she was morbid. Poor Ransom announced this fact to himself as if he had made a great discovery; but in reality he had never been so "Boeotian" as at that moment. It proved nothing of any importance, with regard to Miss Chancellor, to say that she was morbid; any sufficient account of her would lie very much to the rear of that. Why was she morbid, and why was her morbidness typical? Ransom might have exulted if he had gone back far enough to explain that mystery. The women he had hitherto known had been mainly of his own soft clime, and it was not often they exhibited the tendency he detected (and cursorily deplored) in Mrs. Luna's sister. That was the way he liked them—not to think too much, not to feel any responsibility for the government of the world, such as he was sure Miss Chancellor felt. If they would only be private and passive, and have no feeling but for that, and leave publicity to the sex of tougher hide! Ransom was pleased with the vision of that remedy; it must be repeated that he was very provincial.

These considerations were not present to him as definitely as I have written them here; they were summed up in the vague compassion which his cousin's figure excited in his mind, and which was yet accompanied with a sensible reluctance to know her better, obvious as it was that with such a face as that she must be remarkable. He was sorry for her, but he saw in a flash that no one could help her: that was what made her tragic. He had not, seeking his fortune, come away from the blighted South, which weighed upon his heart, to look out for tragedies; at least he didn't want them outside of his office in Pine Street. He broke the silence ensuing upon Mrs. Luna's departure by one of the courteous speeches to which blighted regions may still encourage a tendency, and presently found himself talking comfortably enough with his hostess. Though he had said to himself that no one could help her, the effect of his tone was to dispel her shyness; it was her great advantage (for the career she had proposed to herself) that in certain conditions she was liable suddenly to become bold. She was reassured at finding that her visitor was peculiar; the way he spoke told her that it was no wonder he had fought on the Southern side. She had never yet encountered a personage so exotic, and she always felt more at her ease in the presence of anything strange. It was the usual things of life that filled her with silent rage; which was natural enough, inasmuch as, to her vision, almost everything that was usual was iniquitous. She had no difficulty in asking him now whether he would not stay to dinner—she hoped Adeline had given him her message. It had been when she was upstairs with Adeline, as his card was brought up, a sudden and very abnormal inspiration to offer him this (for her) really ultimate favor; nothing could be further from her common habit than to entertain alone, at any repast, a gentleman she had never seen.

It was the same sort of impulse that had moved her to write to Basil Ransom, in the spring, after

hearing accidentally that he had come to the North and intended, in New York, to practise his profession. It was her nature to look out for duties, to appeal to her conscience for tasks. This attentive organ, earnestly consulted, had represented to her that he was an offshoot of the old slave-holding oligarchy which, within her own vivid remembrance, had plunged the country into blood and tears, and that, as associated with such abominations, he was not a worthy object of patronage for a person whose two brothers—her only ones—had given up life for the Northern cause. It reminded her, however, on the other hand, that he too had been much bereaved, and, moreover, that he had fought and offered his own life, even if it had not been taken. She could not defend herself against a rich admiration—a kind of tenderness of envy—of any one who had been so happy as to have that opportunity. The most secret, the most sacred hope of her nature was that she might some day have such a chance, that she might be a martyr and die for something. Basil Ransom had lived, but she knew he had lived to see bitter hours. His family was ruined; they had lost their slaves, their property, their friends and relations, their home; had tasted of all the cruelty of defeat. He had tried for a while to carry on the plantation himself, but he had a millstone of debt round his neck, and he longed for some work which would transport him to the haunts of men. The State of Mississippi seemed to him the state of despair; so he surrendered the remnants of his patrimony to his mother and sisters, and, at nearly thirty years of age, alighted for the first time in New York, in the costume of his province, with fifty dollars in his pocket and a gnawing hunger in his heart.

That this incident had revealed to the young man his ignorance of many things—only, however, to make him say to himself, after the first angry blush, that here he would enter the game and here he would win it—so much Olive Chancellor could not know; what was sufficient for her was that he had rallied, as the French say, had accepted the accomplished fact, had admitted that North and South were a single, indivisible political organism. Their cousinship—that of Chancellors and Ransoms—was not very close; it was the kind of thing that one might take up or leave alone, as one pleased. It was "in the female line," as Basil Ransom had written, in answering her letter with a good deal of form and flourish; he spoke as if they had been royal houses. Her mother had wished to take it up; it was only the fear of seeming patronizing to people in misfortune that had prevented her from writing to Mississippi. If it had been possible to send Mrs. Ransom money, or even clothes, she would have liked that; but she had no means of ascertaining how such an offering would be taken. By the time Basil came to the North—making advances, as it were—Mrs. Chancellor had passed away; so it was for Olive, left alone in the little house in Charles Street (Adeline being in Europe), to decide.

She knew what her mother would have done, and that helped her decision; for her mother always chose the positive course. Olive had a fear of everything, but her greatest fear was of being afraid. She wished immensely to be generous, and how could one be generous unless one ran a risk? She had erected it into a sort of rule of conduct that whenever she saw a risk she was to take it; and she had frequent humiliations at finding herself safe after all. She was perfectly safe after writing to Basil Ransom; and, indeed, it was difficult to see what he could have done to her except thank her (he was only exceptionally superlative) for her letter, and assure her that he would come and see her the first time his business (he was beginning to get a little) should take him to Boston. He had now come, in redemption of his grateful vow, and even this did not make Miss Chancellor feel that she had courted danger. She saw (when once she had looked at him) that he would not put those worldly interpretations on things which, with her, it was both an impulse and a principle to defy. He was too simple—too Mississippian—for that; she was almost disappointed. She certainly had not hoped that she might have struck him as making unwomanly overtures (Miss Chancellor hated this epithet almost as much as she hated its opposite) ; but she had a presentiment that he would be too good-natured, primitive to that degree. Of all things in the world contention was most sweet to her (though why it is hard to imagine, for it always cost her tears, headaches, a day or two in bed, acute emotion), and it was very possible Basil Ransom would not care to contend. Nothing could be more displeasing than this indifference when people didn't agree with you. That he should agree she did not in the least expect of him; how could a Mississippian agree? If she had supposed he would agree, she would not have written to him.

When he had told her that if she would take him as he was he should be very happy to dine with her, she excused herself a moment and went to give an order in the dining room. The young man, left alone, looked about the parlor—the two parlors which, in their prolonged, adjacent narrowness, formed evidently one apartment—and wandered to the windows at the back, where there was a view of the water; Miss Chancellor having the good fortune to dwell on that side of Charles Street toward which, in the rear, the afternoon sun slants redly, from an horizon indented at empty intervals with wooden spires, the masts of lonely boats, the chimneys of dirty "works," over a brackish expanse of anomalous character, which is too big for a river and too small for a bay. The view seemed to him very picturesque, though in the gathered dusk little was left of it save a cold yellow streak in the west, a gleam of brown water, and the reflection of the lights that had begun to show themselves in a row of houses, impressive to Ransom in their extreme modernness, which overlooked the same lagoon from a long embankment on the left, constructed of stones roughly piled. He thought this prospect, from a city-house, almost romantic; and he turned from it back to the interior (illuminated now by a lamp which the parlor-maid had placed on a table while he stood at the window) as to something still more genial and interesting. The artistic sense in Basil Ransom had not been highly cultivated; neither (though he had passed his early years as the son of a rich man) was his conception of material comfort very definite; it consisted mainly of the vision of plenty of cigars and brandy and water and newspapers, and a cane-bottomed armchair of the right inclination, from which he could stretch his legs. Nevertheless it seemed to him he had never seen an interior that was so much an interior as this queer corridor-shaped drawing room of his new-found kinswoman; he had never felt himself in the presence of so much organized privacy or of so many objects that spoke of habits and tastes. Most of the people he had hitherto known had no tastes; they had a few habits, but these were not of a sort that required much upholstery. He had not as yet been in many houses in New York, and he had never before seen so many accessories. The general character of the place struck him as Bostonian; this was, in fact, very much what he had supposed Boston to be. He had always heard Boston was a city of culture, and now there was culture in Miss Chancellor's tables and sofas, in the books that were everywhere, on little shelves like brackets (as if a book were a statuette), in the photographs and watercolors that covered the walls, in the curtains that were festooned rather stiffly in the doorways. He looked at some of the books and saw that his cousin read German; and his impression of the importance of this (as a symptom of superiority) was not diminished by the fact that he himself had mastered the tongue (knowing it contained a large literature of jurisprudence) during a long, empty, deadly summer on the plantation. It is a curious proof of a certain crude modesty inherent in Basil Ransom that the main effect of his observing his cousin's German books was to give him an idea of the natural energy of Northerners. He had noticed it often before; he had already told himself that he must count with it. It was only after much experience he made the discovery that few Northerners were, in their secret soul, so energetic as he. Many other persons had made it before that. He knew very little about Miss Chancellor; he had come to see her only because she wrote to him; he would never have thought of looking her up, and since then there had been no one in New York he might ask about her. Therefore he could only guess that she was a rich young woman; such a house, inhabited in such a way by a quiet spinster, implied a considerable income. How much? he asked himself; five thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand a year? There was richness to our panting young man in the smallest of these figures. He was not of a mercenary spirit, but he had an immense desire for success, and he had more than once reflected that a moderate capital was an aid to achievement. He had seen in his younger years one of the biggest failures that history commemorates, an immense national *fiasco,* and it had implanted in his mind a deep aversion to the ineffectual. It came over him, while he waited for his hostess to reappear, that she was unmarried as well as rich, that she was sociable (her letter answered for that) as well as single; and he had for a moment a whimsical vision of becoming a partner in so flourishing a firm. He ground his teeth a little as he thought of the contrasts of the human lot; this cushioned feminine nest made him feel unhoused and underfed. Such a mood, however, could only be momentary, for he was conscious at bottom of a bigger stomach than all the culture of Charles Street could fill.

Afterwards, when his cousin had come back and they had gone down to dinner together, where he sat facing her at a little table decorated in the middle with flowers, a position from which he had another view, through a window where the curtain remained undrawn by her direction (she called his attention to this—it was for his benefit), of the dusky, empty river, spotted with points of light—at this period, I say, it was very easy for him to remark to himself that nothing would induce him to make love to such a type as

that. Several months later, in New York, in conversation with Mrs. Luna, of whom he was destined to see a good deal, he alluded by chance to this repast, to the way her sister had placed him at table, and to the remark with which she had pointed out the advantage of his seat.

"That's what they call in Boston being very 'thoughtful,' " Mrs. Luna said, "giving you the Back Bay (don't you hate the name?) to look at, and then taking credit for it."

This, however, was in the future; what Basil Ransom actually perceived was that Miss Chancellor was a signal old maid. That was her quality, her destiny; nothing could be more distinctly written. There are women who are unmarried by accident, and others who are unmarried by option; but Olive Chancellor was unmarried by every implication of her being. She was a spinster as Shelley was a lyric poet, or as the month of August is sultry. She was so essentially a celibate that Ransom found himself thinking of her as old, though when he came to look at her (as he said to himself) it was apparent that her years were fewer than his own. He did not dislike her, she had been so friendly; but, little by little, she gave him an uneasy feeling—the sense that you could never be safe with a person who took things so hard. It came over him that it was because she took things hard she had sought his acquaintance; it had been because she was strenuous, not because she was genial; she had had in her eye—and what an extraordinary eye it was!—not a pleasure, but a duty. She would expect him to be strenuous in return; but he couldn't—in private life, he couldn't; privacy for Basil Ransom consisted entirely in what he called "laying off." She was not so plain on further acquaintance as she had seemed to him at first; even the young Mississippian had culture enough to see that she was refined. Her white skin had a singular look of being drawn tightly across her face; but her features, though sharp and irregular, were delicate in a fashion that suggested good breeding. Their line was perverse, but it was not poor. The curious tint of her eyes was a living color; when she turned it upon you, you thought vaguely of the glitter of green ice. She had absolutely no figure, and presented a certain appearance of feeling cold. With all this, there was something very modern and highly developed in her aspect; she had the advantages as well as the drawbacks of a nervous organization. She smiled constantly at her guest, but from the beginning to the end of dinner, though he made several remarks that he thought might prove amusing, she never once laughed. Later, he saw that she was a woman without laughter; exhilaration, if it ever visited her, was dumb. Once only, in the course of his subsequent acquaintance with her, did it find a voice; and then the sound remained in Ransom's ear as one of the strangest he had heard.

She asked him a great many questions, and made no comment on his answers, which only served to suggest to her fresh inquiries. Her shyness had quite left her, it did not come back; she had confidence enough to wish him to see that she took a great interest in him. Why should she? he wondered. He couldn't believe he was one of *her* kind; he was conscious of much Bohemianism—he drank beer, in New York, in cellars, knew no ladies, and was familiar with a "variety" actress. Certainly, as she knew him better, she would disapprove of him, though, of course, he would never mention the actress, nor even, if necessary, the beer. Ransom's conception of vice was purely as a series of special cases, of explicable accidents. Not that he cared; if it were a part of the Boston character to be inquiring, he would be to the last a courteous Mississippian. He would tell her about Mississippi as much as she liked; he didn't care how much he told her that the old ideas in the South were played out. She would not understand him any the better for that; she would not know how little his own views could be gathered from such a limited admission. What her sister imparted to him about her mania for "reform" had left in his mouth a kind of unpleasant after-taste; he felt, at any rate, that if she had the religion of humanity—Basil Ransom had read Comte, he had read everything—she would never understand him. He, too, had a private vision of reform, but the first principle of it was to reform the reformers. As they drew to the close of a meal which, in spite of all latent incompatibilities, had gone off brilliantly, she said to him that she should have to leave him after dinner, unless perhaps he should be inclined to accompany her. She was going to a small gathering at the house of a friend who had asked a few people, "interested in new ideas," to meet Mrs. Farrinder.

"Oh, thank you," said Basil Ransom. "Is it a party? I haven't been to a party since Mississippi seceded."

"No; Miss Birdseye doesn't give parties. She's an ascetic."

"Oh, well, we have had our dinner," Ransom rejoined, laughing.

His hostess sat silent a moment, with her eyes on the ground; she looked at such times as if she were hesitating greatly between several things she might say, all so important that it was difficult to choose.

"I think it might interest you," she remarked presently. "You will hear some discussion, if you are fond of that. Perhaps you wouldn't agree," she added, resting her strange eyes on him.

"Perhaps I shouldn't—I don't agree with everything," he said, smiling and stroking his leg.

"Don't you care for human progress?" Miss Chancellor went on.

"I don't know—I never saw any. Are you going to show me some?"

"I can show you an earnest effort toward it. That's the most one can be sure of. But I am not sure you are worthy."

"Is it something very Bostonian? I should like to see that," said Basil Ransom.

"There are movements in other cities. Mrs. Farrinder goes everywhere; she may speak tonight."

"Mrs. Farrinder, the celebrated——?"

"Yes, the celebrated; the great apostle of the emancipation of women. She is a great friend of Miss Birdseye."

"And who is Miss Birdseye?"

"She is one of our celebrities. She is the woman in the world, I suppose, who has labored most for every wise reform. I think I ought to tell you," Miss Chancellor went on in a moment, "she was one of the earliest, one of the most passionate, of the old Abolitionists."

She had thought, indeed, she ought to tell him that, and it threw her into a little tremor of excitement to do so. Yet, if she had been afraid he would show some irritation at this news, she was disappointed at the geniality with which he exclaimed:

"Why, poor old lady—she must be quite mature!"

It was therefore with some severity that she rejoined:

"She will never be old. She is the youngest spirit I know. But if you are not in sympathy, perhaps you had better not come," she went on.

"In sympathy with what, dear madam?" Basil Ransom asked, failing still, to her perception, to catch the tone of real seriousness. "If, as you say, there is to be a discussion, there will be different sides, and of course one can't sympathize with both."

"Yes, but every one will, in his way—or in her way—plead the cause of the new truths. If you don't care for them, you won't go with us."

"I tell you I haven't the least idea what they are! I have never yet encountered in the world any but old truths—as old as the sun and moon. How can I know? But *do* take me; it's such a chance to see Boston."

"It isn't Boston—it's humanity!" Miss Chancellor, as she made this remark, rose from her chair, and her movement seemed to say that she consented. But before she quitted her kinsman to get ready, she observed to him that she was sure he knew what she meant; he was only pretending he didn't.

"Well, perhaps, after all, I have a general idea," he confessed; "but don't you see how this little reunion will give me a chance to fix it?"

She lingered an instant, with her anxious face. "Mrs. Farrinder will fix it!" she said; and she went to prepare herself.

It was in this poor young lady's nature to be anxious, to have scruple within scruple and to forecast the consequences of things. She returned in ten minutes, in her bonnet, which she had apparently assumed in recognition of Miss Birdseye's asceticism. As she stood there drawing on her gloves—her visitor had fortified himself against Mrs. Farrinder by another glass of wine—she declared to him that she quite repented of having proposed to him to go; something told her that he would be an unfavorable element.

"Why, is it going to be a spiritual *séance?"* Basil Ransom asked.

"Well, I have heard at Miss Birdseye's some inspirational speaking." Olive Chancellor was determined to look him straight in the face as she said this; her sense of the way it might strike him operated as a cogent, not as a deterrent, reason.

"Why, Miss Olive, it's just got up on purpose for me!" cried the young Mississippian, radiant, and clasping his hands. She thought him very handsome as he said this, but reflected that unfortunately men didn't care for the truth, especially the new kinds, in proportion as they were good-looking. She had, however, a moral resource that she could always fall back upon; it had already been a comfort to her, on occasions of acute feeling, that she hated men, as a class, anyway. "And I want so much to see an old Abolitionist; I have never laid eyes on one," Basil Ransom added.

"Of course you couldn't see one in the South; you were too afraid of them to let them come there!" She was now trying to think of something she might say that would be sufficiently disagreeable to make him cease to insist on accompanying her; for, strange to record—if anything, in a person of that intense sensibility, be stranger than any other —her second thought with regard to having asked him had deepened with the elapsing moments into an unreasoned terror of the effect of his presence. "Perhaps Miss Birdseye won't like you," she went on, as they waited for the carriage.

"I don't know; I reckon she will," said Basil Ransom good-humoredly. He evidently had no intention of giving up his opportunity.

From the window of the dining room, at that moment, they heard the carriage drive up. Miss Birdseye lived at the South End; the distance was considerable, and Miss Chancellor had ordered a hackney coach, it being one of the advantages of living in Charles Street that stables were near. The logic of her conduct was none of the clearest; for if she had been alone she would have proceeded to her destination by the aid of the streetcar; not from economy (for she had the good fortune not to be obliged to consult it to that degree), and not from any love of wandering about Boston at night (a kind of exposure she greatly disliked), but by reason of a theory she devotedly nursed, a theory which bade her put off invidious differences and mingle in the common life. She would have gone on foot to Boylston Street, and there she would have taken the public conveyance (in her heart she loathed it) to the South End. Boston was full of poor girls who had to walk about at night and to squeeze into horsecars in which every sense was displeased; and why should she hold herself superior to these? Olive Chancellor regulated her conduct on lofty principles, and this is why, having tonight the advantage of a gentleman's protection, she sent for a

carriage to obliterate that patronage. If they had gone together in the common way she would have seemed to owe it to him that she should be so daring, and he belonged to a sex to which she wished to be under no obligations. Months before, when she wrote to him, it had been with the sense, rather, of putting *him* in debt. As they rolled toward the South End, side by side, in a good deal of silence, bouncing and bumping over the railway tracks very little less, after all, than if their wheels had been fitted to them, and looking out on either side at rows of red houses, dusky in the lamplight, with protuberant fronts, approached by ladders of stone; as they proceeded, with these contemplative undulations, Miss Chancellor said to her companion, with a concentrated desire to defy him, as a punishment for having thrown her (she couldn't tell why) into such a tremor:

"Don't you believe, then, in the coming of a better day—in its being possible to do something for the human race?"

Poor Ransom perceived the defiance, and he felt rather bewildered; he wondered what type, after all, he *had* got hold of, and what game was being played with him. Why had she made advances, if she wanted to pinch him this way? However, he was good for any game—that one as well as another—and he saw that he was "in" for something of which he had long desired to have a nearer view. "Well, Miss Olive," he answered, putting on again his big hat, which he had been holding in his lap, "what strikes me most is that the human race has got to bear its troubles."

"That's what men say to women, to make them patient in the position they have made for them."

"Oh, the position of women!" Basil Ransom exclaimed. "The position of women is to make fools of men. I would change my position for yours any day," he went on. "That's what I said to myself as I sat there in your elegant home."

He could not see, in the dimness of the carriage, that she had flushed quickly, and he did not know that she disliked to be reminded of certain things which, for her, were mitigations of the hard feminine lot. But the passionate quaver with which, a moment later, she answered him sufficiently assured him that he had touched her at a tender point.

"Do you make it a reproach to me that I happen to have a little money? The dearest wish of my heart is to do something with it for others—for the miserable."

Basil Ransom might have greeted this last declaration With the sympathy it deserved, might have commended the noble aspirations of his kinswoman. But what struck him, rather, was the oddity of so sudden a sharpness of pitch in an intercourse which, an hour or two before, had begun in perfect amity, and he burst once more into an irrepressible laugh. This made his companion feel, with intensity, how little she was joking. "I don't know why I should care what you think," she said.

"Don't care—don't care. What does it matter? It is not of the slightest importance."

He might say that, but it was not true; she felt that there were reasons why she should care. She had brought him into her life, and she should have to pay for it. But she wished to know the worst at once. "Are you against our emancipation?" she asked, turning a white face on him in the momentary radiance of a street lamp.

"Do you mean your voting and preaching and all that sort of thing?" He made this inquiry, but seeing how seriously she would take his answer, he was almost frightened, and hung fire. "I will tell you when I have heard Mrs. Farrinder."

They had arrived at the address given by Miss Chancellor to the coachman, and their vehicle stopped with a lurch. Basil Ransom got out; he stood at the door with an extended hand, to assist the young lady. But she seemed to hesitate; she sat there with her spectral face. "You hate it!" she exclaimed, in a low tone.

"Miss Birdseye will convert me," said Ransom, with intention; for he had grown very curious, and he was afraid that now, at the last, Miss Chancellor would prevent his entering the house. She alighted without his help, and behind her he ascended the high steps of Miss Birdseye's residence. He had grown very curious, and among the things he wanted to know was why in the world this ticklish spinster had written to him.

She had told him before they started that they should be early; she wished to see Miss Birdseye alone, before the arrival of anyone else. This was just for the pleasure of seeing her—it was an opportunity; she was always so taken up with others. She received Miss Chancellor in the hall of the mansion, which had a salient front, an enormous and very high number—756—painted in gilt on the glass light above the door, a tin sign bearing the name of a doctress (Mary J. Prance) suspended from one of the windows of the basement, and a peculiar look of being both new and faded—a kind of modern fatigue—like certain articles of commerce which are sold at a reduction as shopworn. The hall was very narrow; a considerable part of it was occupied by a large hat tree, from which several coats and shawls already depended; the rest offered space for certain lateral demonstrations on Miss Birdseye's part. She sidled about her visitors, and at last went round to open for them a door of further admission, which happened to be locked inside. She was a little old lady, with an enormous head; that was the first thing Ransom noticed—the vast, fair, protuberant, candid, ungarnished brow, surmounting a pair of weak, kind, tired-looking eyes, and ineffectually balanced in the rear by a cap which had the air of falling backward, and which Miss Birdseye suddenly felt for while she talked, with unsuccessful irrelevant movements. She had a sad, soft, pale face, which (and it was the effect of her whole head) looked as if it had been soaked, blurred, and made vague by exposure to some slow dissolvent. The long practice of philanthropy had not given accent to her features; it had rubbed out their transitions, their meanings. The waves of sympathy, of enthusiasm, had wrought upon them in the same way in which the waves of time finally modify the surface of old marble busts, gradually washing away their sharpness, their details. In her large countenance her dim little smile scarcely showed. It was a mere sketch of a smile, a kind of installment, or payment on account; it seemed to say that she would smile more if she had time, but that you could see, without this, that she was gentle and easy to beguile.

She always dressed in the same way: she wore a loose black jacket, with deep pockets, which were stuffed with papers, memoranda of a voluminous correspondence; and from beneath her jacket depended a short stuff dress. The brevity of this simple garment was the one device by which Miss Birdseye managed to suggest that she was a woman of business, that she wished to be free for action. She belonged to the Short-Skirts League, as a matter of course; for she belonged to any and every league that had been founded for almost any purpose whatever. This did not prevent her being a confused, entangled, inconsequent, discursive old woman, whose charity began at home and ended nowhere, whose credulity kept pace with it, and who knew less about her fellow-creatures, if possible, after fifty years of humanitary zeal, than on the day she had gone into the field to testify against the iniquity of most arrangements. Basil Ransom knew very little about such a life as hers, but she seemed to him a revelation of a class, and a multitude of socialistic figures, of names and episodes that he had heard of, grouped themselves behind her. She looked as if she had spent her life on platforms, in audiences, in conventions, in phalansteries, in *séances;* in her faded face there was a kind of reflection of ugly lecture lamps; with its habit of an upward angle, it seemed turned toward a public speaker, with an effort of respiration in the thick air in which social reforms are usually discussed. She talked continually, in a voice of which the spring seemed broken, like that of an over-worked bell-wire; and when Miss Chancellor explained that she had brought Mr. Ransom because he was so anxious to meet Mrs. Farrinder, she gave the young man a delicate, dirty, democratic little hand, looking at him kindly, as she could not help doing, but without the smallest discrimination as against others who might not have the good fortune (which involved, possibly, an injustice) to be present on such an interesting occasion. She struck him as very poor, but it was only afterward that he learned she had never had a penny in her life. No one had an idea how she lived; whenever money was given her she gave it away to a negro or a refugee. No woman could be less invidious, but on the whole she preferred these two classes of the human race. Since the Civil War much of her occupation was gone; for before that her best hours had been spent in fancying that she was helping some Southern slave to escape. It would have been a nice question whether, in her heart of hearts, for the sake of this excitement, she did not sometimes wish the blacks back in bondage. She had suffered in the same way by the relaxation of many European despotisms, for in former years much of the romance of her life had been in smoothing the pillow of exile for banished conspirators. Her refugees had been very precious to her; she was always trying to raise money for some cadaverous Pole, to obtain lessons for some shirtless Italian. There was a legend that an Hungarian had once possessed himself of her affections, and had disappeared after robbing her of everything she possessed. This, however, was very apocryphal, for she had never possessed anything, and it was open to grave doubt that she could have entertained a sentiment so personal. She was

in love, even in those days, only with causes, and she languished only for emancipations. But they had been the happiest days, for when causes were embodied in foreigners (what else were the Africans?), they were certainly more appealing.

She had just come down to see Doctor Prance—to see whether she wouldn't like to come up. But she wasn't in her room, and Miss Birdseye guessed she had gone out to her supper; she got her supper at a boarding table about two blocks off. Miss Birdseye expressed the hope that Miss Chancellor had had hers; she would have had plenty of time to take it, for no one had come in yet; she didn't know what made them all so late. Ransom perceived that the garments suspended to the hat rack were not a sign that Miss Birdseye's friends had assembled; if he had gone a little further still he would have recognized the house as one of those in which mysterious articles of clothing are always hooked to something in the hall. Miss Birdseye's visitors, those of Doctor Prance, and of other tenants—for Number 756 was the common residence of several persons, among whom there prevailed much vagueness of boundary—used to leave things to be called for; many of them went about with satchels and reticules, for which they were always looking for places of deposit. What completed the character of this interior was Miss Birdseye's own apartment, into which her guests presently made their way, and where they were joined by various other members of the good lady's circle. Indeed, it completed Miss Birdseye herself, if anything could be said to render that office to this essentially formless old woman, who had no more outline than a bundle of hay. But the bareness of her long, loose, empty parlor (it was shaped exactly like Miss Chancellor's) told that she had never had any needs but moral needs, and that all her history had been that of her sympathies. The place was lighted by a small hot glare of gas, which made it look white and featureless. It struck even Basil Ransom with its flatness, and he said to himself that his cousin must have a very big bee in her bonnet to make her like such a house. He did not know then, and he never knew, that she mortally disliked it, and that in a career in which she was constantly exposing herself to offense and laceration, her most poignant suffering came from the injury of her taste. She had tried to kill that nerve, to persuade herself that taste was only frivolity in the disguise of knowledge; but her susceptibility was constantly blooming afresh and making her wonder whether an absence of nice arrangements were a necessary part of the enthusiasm of humanity. Miss Birdseye was always trying to obtain employment, lessons in drawing, orders for portraits, for poor foreign artists, as to the greatness of whose talent she pledged herself without reserve; but in point of fact she had not the faintest sense of the scenic or plastic side of life.

Toward nine o'clock the light of her hissing burners smote the majestic person of Mrs. Farrinder, who might have contributed to answer that question of Miss Chancellor's in the negative. She was a copious, handsome woman, in whom angularity had been corrected by the air of success; she had a rustling dress (it was evident what *she* thought about taste), abundant hair of a glossy blackness, a pair of folded arms, the expression of which seemed to say that rest, in such a career as hers, was as sweet as it was brief, and a terrible regularity of feature. I apply that adjective to her fine placid mask because she seemed to face you with a question of which the answer was preordained, to ask you how a countenance could fail to be noble of which the measurements were so correct. You would contest neither the measurements nor the nobleness, and had to feel that Mrs. Farrinder imposed herself. There was a lithographic smoothness about her, and a mixture of the American matron and the public character. There was something public in her eye, which was large, cold, and quiet; it had acquired a sort of exposed reticence from the habit of looking down from a lecture desk, over a sea of heads, while its distinguished owner was eulogized by a leading citizen. Mrs. Farrinder, at almost any time, had the air of being introduced by a few remarks. She talked with great slowness and distinctness, and evidently a high sense of responsibility; she pronounced every syllable of every word and insisted on being explicit. If, in conversation with her, you attempted to take anything for granted, or to jump two or three steps at a time, she paused, looking at you with a cold patience, as if she knew that trick, and then went on at her own measured pace. She lectured on temperance and the rights of women; the ends she labored for were to give the ballot to every woman in the country and to take the flowing bowl from every man. She was held to have a very fine manner, and to embody the domestic virtues and the graces of the drawing room; to be a shining proof, in short, that the forum, for ladies, is not necessarily hostile to the fireside. She had a husband, and his name was Amariah.

Doctor Prance had come back from supper and made her appearance in response to an invitation that Miss Birdseye's relaxed voice had tinkled down to her from the hall over the banisters, with much repetition, to secure attention. She was a plain, spare young woman, with short hair and an eyeglass; she looked about her with a kind of nearsighted deprecation, and seemed to hope that she should not be expected to generalize in any way, or supposed to have come up for any purpose more social than to see what Miss Birdseye wanted this time. By nine o'clock twenty other persons had arrived, and had placed themselves in the chairs that were ranged along the sides of the long, bald room, in which they ended by producing the similitude of an enormous streetcar. The apartment contained little else but these chairs, many of which had a borrowed aspect, an implication of bare bedrooms in the upper regions; a table or two with a discolored marble top, a few books, and a collection of newspapers piled up in corners. Ransom could see for himself that the occasion was not crudely festive; there was a want of convivial movement,

and, among most of the visitors, even of mutual recognition. They sat there as if they were waiting for something; they looked obliquely and silently at Mrs. Farrinder, and were plainly under the impression that, fortunately, they were not there to amuse themselves. The ladies, who were much the more numerous, wore their bonnets, like Miss Chancellor; the men were in the garb of toil, many of them in weary-looking overcoats. Two or three had retained their overshoes, and as you approached them the odor of the india rubber was perceptible. It was not, however, that Miss Birdseye ever noticed anything of that sort; she neither knew what she smelled nor tasted what she ate. Most of her friends had an anxious, haggard look, though there were sundry exceptions—half a dozen placid, florid faces. Basil Ransom wondered who they all were; he had a general idea they were mediums, communists, vegetarians. It was not, either, that Miss' Birdseye failed to wander about among them with repetitions of inquiry and friendly absences of attention; she sat down near most of them in turn, saying "Yes, yes," vaguely and kindly, to remarks they made to her, feeling for the papers in the pockets of her loosened bodice, recovering her cap and sacrificing her spectacles, wondering most of all what had been her idea in convoking these people. Then she remembered that it had been connected in some way with Mrs. Farrinder; that this eloquent woman had promised to favor the company with a few reminiscences of her last campaign; to sketch even, perhaps, the lines on which she intended to operate during the coming winter. This was what Olive Chancellor had come to hear; this would be the attraction for the dark-eyed young man (he looked like a genius) she had brought with her. Miss Birdseye made her way back to the great lecturess, who was bending an indulgent attention on Miss Chancellor; the latter compressed into a small space, to be near her, and sitting with clasped hands and a concentration of inquiry which by contrast made Mrs. Farrinder's manner seem large and free. In her transit, however, the hostess was checked by the arrival of fresh pilgrims; she had no idea she had mentioned the occasion to so many people—she only remembered, as it were, those she had forgotten—and it was certainly a proof of the interest felt in Mrs. Farrinder's work. The people who had just come in were Doctor and Mrs. Tarrant and their daughter Verena; he was a mesmeric healer and she was of old Abolitionist stock. Miss Birdseye rested her dim, dry smile upon the daughter, who was new to her, and it floated before her that she would probably be remarkable as a genius; her parentage was an implication of that. There was a genius for Miss Birdseye in every bush. Selah Tarrant had effected wonderful cures; she knew so many people—if they would only try him. His wife was a daughter of Abraham Greenstreet; she had kept a runaway slave in her house for thirty days. That was years before, when this girl must have been a child; but hadn't it thrown a kind of rainbow over her cradle, and wouldn't she naturally have some gift? The girl was very pretty, though she had red hair.

Mrs. Farrinder, meanwhile, was not eager to address the assembly. She confessed as much to Olive Chancellor, with a smile which asked that a temporary lapse of promptness might not be too harshly judged. She had addressed so many assemblies, and she wanted to hear what other people had to say. Miss Chancellor herself had thought so much on the vital subject; would not she make a few remarks and give them some of her experiences? How did the ladies on Beacon Street feel about the ballot? Perhaps she could speak for *them* more than for some others. That was a branch of the question on which, it might be, the leaders had not information enough; but they wanted to take in everything, and why shouldn't Miss Chancellor just make that field her own? Mrs. Farrinder spoke in the tone of one who took views so wide that they might easily, at first, before you could see how she worked round, look almost meretricious; she was conscious of a scope that exceeded the first flight of your imagination. She urged upon her companion the idea of laboring in the world of fashion, appeared to attribute to her familiar relations with that mysterious realm, and wanted to know why she shouldn't stir up some of her friends down there on the Mill-dam?

Olive Chancellor received this appeal with peculiar feelings. With her immense sympathy for reform, she found herself so often wishing that reformers were a little different. There was something grand about Mrs. Farrinder; it lifted one up to be with her: but there was a false note when she spoke to her young friend about the ladies in Beacon Street. Olive hated to hear that fine avenue talked about as if it were such a remarkable place, and to live there were a proof of worldly glory. All sorts of inferior people lived there, and so brilliant a woman as Mrs. Farrinder, who lived at Roxbury, ought not to mix things up. It was, of course, very wretched to be irritated by such mistakes; but this was not the first time Miss Chancellor had observed that the possession of nerves was not by itself a reason for embracing the new truths. She knew her place in the Boston hierarchy, and it was not what Mrs. Farrinder supposed; so that there was a want of perspective in talking to her as if she had been a representative of the aristocracy. Nothing could be weaker, she knew very well, than (in the United States) to apply that term too literally; nevertheless, it would represent a reality if one were to say that, by distinction, the Chancellors belonged to the *bourgeoisie*—the oldest and best. They might care for such a position or not (as it happened, they were very proud of it), but there they were, and it made Mrs. Farrinder seem provincial (there was something provincial, after all, in the way she did her hair too) not to understand. When Miss Birdseye spoke as if one were a "leader of society," Olive could forgive her even that odious expression, because, of course, one never pretended that she, poor dear, had the smallest sense of the real. She was heroic, she was sublime, the whole moral history of Boston was reflected in her displaced spectacles; but it was a part of her originality, as it were, that she was deliciously provincial. Olive Chancellor seemed to herself to have privileges enough without being affiliated to the exclusive set and having invitations to the smaller parties, which were the real test; it was a mercy for her that she had not that added immorality on her conscience. The ladies Mrs. Farrinder meant (it was to be supposed she meant some particular ones) might speak for themselves. She wished to work in another field; she had long been preoccupied with the romance of the people. She had an immense desire to know intimately some *very* poor girl. This might seem one of the most accessible of pleasures; but, in point of fact, she had not found it so. There were two or three pale shop-maidens whose acquaintance she had sought; but they had seemed afraid of her, and the attempt had come to nothing. She took them more tragically than they took themselves; they couldn't make out what she wanted them to do, and they always ended by being odiously mixed up with Charlie. Charlie was a young man in a white overcoat and a paper collar; it was for him, in the last analysis, that they cared much the most. They cared far more about Charlie than about the ballot. Olive Chancellor wondered how Mrs. Farrinder would treat that branch of the question. In her researches among her young townswomen she had always found this obtrusive swain planted in her path, and she grew at last to dislike him extremely. It filled her with exasperation to think that he should be necessary to the happiness of his victims (she had learned that whatever they might talk about with her, it was of him and him only that they discoursed among themselves), and one of the main recommendations of the evening club for her fatigued, underpaid sisters, which it had long been her dream to establish, was that it would in some degree undermine his position—distinct as her prevision might be that he would be in waiting at the door. She hardly knew what to say to Mrs. Farrinder when this momentarily misdirected woman, still preoccupied with the Mill-dam, returned to the charge.

"We want laborers in that field, though I know two or three lovely women—sweet *home-women*—moving in circles that are for the most part closed to every new voice, who are doing their best to help on

the fight. I have several names that might surprise you, names well known on State Street. But we can't have too many recruits, especially among those whose refinement is generally acknowledged. If it be necessary, we are prepared to take certain steps to conciliate the shrinking. Our movement is for all—it appeals to the most delicate ladies. Raise the standard among them, and bring me a thousand names. I know several that I should like to have. I look after the details as well as the big currents," Mrs. Farrinder added, in a tone as explanatory as could be expected of such a woman, and with a smile of which the sweetness was thrilling to her listener.

"I can't talk to those people, I can't!" said Olive Chancellor, with a face which seemed to plead for a remission of responsibility. "I want to give myself up to others; I want to know everything that lies beneath and out of sight, don't you know? I want to enter into the lives of women who are lonely, who are piteous. I want to be near to them—to help them. I want to do something—oh, I should like so to speak!"

"We should be glad to have you make a few remarks at present," Mrs. Farrinder declared, with a punctuality which revealed the faculty of presiding.

"Oh dear, no, I can't speak; I have none of that sort of talent. I have no self-possession, no eloquence; I can't put three words together. But I do want to contribute."

"What *have* you got?" Mrs. Farrinder inquired, looking at her interlocutress, up and down, with the eye of business, in which there was a certain chill. "Have you got money?"

Olive was so agitated for the moment with the hope that this great woman would approve of her on the financial side that she took no time to reflect that some other quality might, in courtesy, have been suggested. But she confessed to possessing a certain capital, and the tone seemed rich and deep in which Mrs. Farrinder said to her, "Then contribute that!" She was so good as to develop this idea, and her picture of the part Miss Chancellor might play by making liberal donations to a fund for the diffusion among the women of America of a more adequate conception of their public and private rights—a fund her adviser had herself lately inaugurated—this bold, rapid sketch had the vividness which characterized the speaker's most successful public efforts. It placed Olive under the spell; it made her feel almost inspired. If her life struck others in that way—especially a woman like Mrs. Farrinder, whose horizon was so full—then there must be something for her to do. It was one thing to choose for herself, but now the great representative of the enfranchisement of their sex (from every form of bondage) had chosen for her.

The barren, gas-lighted room grew richer and richer to her earnest eyes; it seemed to expand, to open itself to the great life of humanity. The serious, tired people, in their bonnets and overcoats, began to glow like a company of heroes. Yes, she would do something, Olive Chancellor said to herself; she would do something to brighten the darkness of that dreadful image that was . always before her, and against which it seemed to her at times that she had been born to lead a crusade—the image of the unhappiness of women. The unhappiness of women! The voice of their silent suffering was always in her ears, the ocean of tears that they had shed from the beginning of time seemed to pour through her own eyes. Ages of oppression had rolled over them; uncounted millions had lived only to be tortured, to be crucified. They were her sisters, they were her own, and the day of their delivery had dawned. This was the only sacred cause; this was the great, the just revolution. It must triumph, it must sweep everything before it; it must exact from the other, the brutal, blood-stained, ravening race, the last particle of expiation! It would be the greatest change the world had seen; it would be a new era for the human family, and the names of those who had helped to show the way and lead the squadrons would be the brightest in the tables of fame. They would be names of women weak, insulted, persecuted, but devoted in every pulse to their being to the cause, and asking no better fate than to die for it. It was not clear to this interesting girl in what manner such a sacrifice (as this last) would be required of her, but she saw the matter through a kind of sunrise-mist of emotion which made danger as rosy as success. When Miss Birdseye approached, it transfigured her familiar, her comical shape, and made the poor little humanitary hack seem already a martyr. Olive Chancellor looked at her with love, remembered that she had never, in her long, unrewarded, weary life, had a thought or an impulse for herself. She had been consumed by the passion of sympathy; it had crumpled her into as many creases as an old glazed, distended glove. She had been laughed at, but she never knew it; she was treated as a bore, but she never cared. She had nothing in the world but the clothes on her back, and when she should go down into the grave she would leave nothing behind her but her grotesque, undistinguished, pathetic little name. And yet people said that women were vain, that they were personal, that they were interested! While Miss Birdseye stood there, asking Mrs. Farrinder if she wouldn't say something, Olive Chancellor tenderly fastened a small battered brooch which confined her collar and which had half detached itself.

"Oh, thank you," said Miss Birdseye, "I shouldn't like to lose it; it was given me by Mirandola!" He had been one of her refugees in the old time, when two or three of her friends, acquainted with the limits of his resources, wondered how he had come into possession of the trinket. She had been diverted again, after her greeting with Doctor and Mrs. Tarrant, by stopping to introduce the tall, dark young man whom Miss Chancellor had brought with her to Doctor Prance. She had become conscious of his somewhat somber figure, uplifted against the wall, near the door; he was leaning there in solitude, unacquainted with opportunities which Miss Birdseye felt to be, collectively, of value, and which were really, of course, what strangers came to Boston for. It did not occur to her to ask herself why Miss Chancellor didn't talk to him, since she had brought him; Miss Birdseye was incapable of a speculation of this kind. Olive, in fact, had remained vividly conscious of her kinsman's isolation until the moment when Mrs. Farrinder lifted her, with a word, to a higher plane. She watched him across the room; she saw that he might be bored. But she proposed to herself not to mind that; she had asked him, after all, not to come. Then he was no worse off than others; he was only waiting, like the rest; and before they left she would introduce him to Mrs. Farrinder. She might tell that lady who he was first; it was not every one that would care to know a person who had borne such a part in the Southern disloyalty. It came over our young lady that when she sought the acquaintance of her distant kinsman she had indeed done a more complicated thing than she suspected. The sudden uneasiness that he flung over her in the carriage had not left her, though she felt it less now she was with others, and especially that she was close to Mrs. Farrinder, who was such a fountain of strength. At any rate, if he was bored, he could speak to someone; there were excellent people near him, even if they *were* ardent reformers. He could speak to that pretty girl who had just come in—the one with red hair—if he liked; Southerners were supposed to be so chivalrous!

Miss Birdseye reasoned much less, and did not offer to introduce him to Verena Tarrant, who was apparently being presented by her parents to a group of friends at the other end of the room. It came back to Miss Birdseye, in this connection, that, sure enough, Verena had been away for a long time—for nearly a year; had been on a visit to friends in the West, and would therefore naturally be a stranger to most of the Boston circle. Doctor Prance was looking at her —at Miss Birdseye—with little, sharp, fixed pupils; and the good lady wondered whether she were angry at having been induced to come up. She had a general impression that when genius was original its temper was high, and all this would be the case with Doctor Prance. She wanted to say to her that she could go down again if she liked; but even to Miss Birdseye's unsophisticated mind this scarcely appeared, as regards a guest, an adequate formula of dismissal. She tried to bring the young Southerner out; she said to him that she presumed they would have some entertainment soon—Mrs. Farrinder could be interesting when she tried! And then she bethought herself to introduce him to Doctor Prance; it might serve as a reason for having brought her up. Moreover, it would do her good to break up her work now and then; she pursued her medical studies far into the night, and Miss Birdseye, who was nothing of a sleeper (Mary Prance, precisely, had wanted to treat her for it), had heard her, in the stillness of the small hours, with her open windows (she had fresh air on the brain), sharpening instruments (it was Miss Birdseye's mild belief that she dissected), in a little physiological laboratory which she had set up in her back room, the room which, if she hadn't been a doctor, might have been her "chamber," and perhaps was, even with the dissecting, Miss Birdseye didn't know! She explained her young friends to each other, a trifle incoherently, perhaps, and then went to stir up Mrs. Farrinder.

Basil Ransom had already noticed Doctor Prance; he had not been at all bored, and had observed everyone in the room, arriving at all sorts of ingenious inductions. The little medical lady struck him as a perfect example of the "Yankee female"—the figure which, in the unregenerate imagination of the children of the cotton states, was produced by the New England school system, the Puritan code, the ungenial climate, the absence of chivalry. Spare, dry, hard, without a curve, an inflection or a grace, she seemed to ask no odds in the battle of life and to be prepared to give none. But Ransom could see that she was not an enthusiast, and after his contact with his cousin's enthusiasm this was rather a relief to him. She looked like a boy, and not even like a good boy. It was evident that if she had been a boy, she would have "cut" school, to try private experiments in mechanics or to make researches in natural history. It was true that if she had been a boy she would have borne some relation to a girl, whereas Doctor Prance appeared to bear none whatever. Except her intelligent eye, she had no features to speak of. Ransom asked her if she were acquainted with the lioness, and on her staring at him, without response, explained that he meant the renowned Mrs. Farrinder.

"Well, I don't know as I ought to say that I'm acquainted with her; but I've heard her on the platform. I have paid my half-dollar," the doctor added, with a certain grimness.

"Well, did she convince you?" Ransom inquired.

"Convince me of what, sir?"

"That women are so superior to men."

"Oh, deary me!" said Doctor Prance, with a little impatient sigh; "I guess I know more about women than she does."

"And that isn't your opinion, I hope," said Ransom, laughing.

"Men and women are all the same to me," Doctor Prance remarked. "I don't see any difference. There is room for improvement in both sexes. Neither of them is up to the standard." And on Ransom's asking her what the standard appeared to her to be, she said, "Well, they ought to live better; that's what they ought to do." And she went on to declare, further, that she thought they all talked too much. This had so long been Ransom's conviction that his heart quite warmed to Doctor Prance, and he paid homage to her wisdom in the manner of Mississippi—with a richness of compliment that made her turn her acute, suspicious eye upon him. This checked him; she was capable of thinking that *he* talked too much—she herself having, apparently, no general conversation. It was german to the matter, at any rate, for him to observe that he believed they were to have a lecture from Mrs. Farrinder—he didn't know why she didn't begin. "Yes," said Doctor Prance, rather drily, "I suppose that's what Miss Birdseye called me up for. She seemed to think I wouldn't want to miss that."

"Whereas, I infer, you could console yourself for the loss of the oration," Ransom suggested.

"Well, I've got some work. I don't want any one to teach me what a woman can do!" Doctor Prance declared. "She can find out some things, if she tries. Besides, I am familiar with Mrs. Farrinder's system; I know all she has got to say."

"Well, what is it, then, since she continues to remain silent?"

"Well, what it amounts to is just that women want to have a better time. That's what it comes to in the end. I am aware of that, without her telling me."

"And don't you sympathize with such an aspiration?"

"Well, I don't know as I cultivate the sentimental side," said Doctor Prance. "There's plenty of sympathy without mine. If they want to have a better time, I suppose it's natural; so do men too, I suppose. But I don't know as it appeals to me—to make sacrifices for it; it ain't such a wonderful time—the best you *can* have!"

This little lady was tough and technical; she evidently didn't care for great movements; she became more and more interesting to Basil Ransom, who, it is to be feared, had a fund of cynicism. He asked her if she knew his cousin, Miss Chancellor, whom he indicated, beside Mrs. Farrinder; *she* believed, on the contrary, in wonderful times (she thought they were coming); she had plenty of sympathy, and he was sure she was willing to make sacrifices.

Doctor Prance looked at her across the room for a moment; then she said she didn't know her, but she guessed she knew others like her—she went to see them when they were sick. "She's having a private lecture to herself," Ransom remarked; whereupon Doctor Prance rejoined, "Well, I guess she'll have to pay for it!" She appeared to regret her own half-dollar, and to be vaguely impatient of the behavior of her sex. Ransom became so sensible of this that he felt it was indelicate to allude further to the cause of woman, and, for a change, endeavored to elicit from his companion some information about the gentlemen present. He had given her a chance, vainly, to start some topic herself; but he could see that she had no interests beyond the researches from which, this evening, she had been torn, and was incapable of asking him a personal question. She knew two or three of the gentlemen; she had seen them before at Miss Birdseye's. Of course she knew principally ladies; the time hadn't come when a lady-doctor was sent for by a gentleman, and she hoped it never would, though some people seemed to think that this was what lady-doctors were working for. She knew Mr. Pardon; that was the young man with the "side-whiskers" and the white hair; he was a kind of editor, and he wrote, too, "over his signature"—perhaps Basil had read some of his works; he was under thirty, in spite of his white hair. He was a great deal thought of in magazine circles. She believed he was very bright—but she hadn't read anything. She didn't read much—not for amusement; only the "Transcript." She believed Mr. Pardon sometimes wrote in the "Transcript"; well, she supposed he *was* very bright. The other that she knew—only she didn't know him (she supposed Basil would think that queer)—was the tall, pale gentleman, with the black mustache and the eyeglass. She knew him because she had met him in society; but she didn't know him—well, because she didn't want to. If he should come and speak to her—and he looked as if he were going to work round that way—she should just say to him, "Yes, sir," or "No, sir," very coldly. She couldn't help it if he did think her dry; if *he* were a little more dry, it might be better for him. What was the matter with him? Oh, she thought she had mentioned that; he was a mesmeric healer, he made miraculous cures. She didn't believe in his system or disbelieve in it, one way or the other; she only knew that she had been called to see ladies he had worked on, and she found that he had made them lose a lot of valuable time. He talked to them—well, as if he didn't know what he was saying. She guessed he was quite ignorant of physiology, and she didn't think he

ought to go round taking responsibilities. She didn't want to be narrow, but she thought a person ought to know something. She supposed Basil would think her very uplifted; but he had put the question to her, as she might say. All she could say was she didn't want him to be laying his hands on any of *her* folks; it was all done with the hands—what wasn't done with the tongue! Basil could see that Doctor Prance was irritated; that this extreme candor of allusion to her neighbor was probably not habitual to her, as a member of a society in which the casual expression of strong opinion generally produced waves of silence. But he blessed her irritation, for him it was so illuminating; and to draw further profit from it he asked her who the young lady was with the red hair—the pretty one, whom he had only noticed during the last ten minutes. She was Miss Tarrant, the daughter of the healer; hadn't she mentioned his name? Selah Tarrant; if he wanted to send for him. Doctor Prance wasn't acquainted with her, beyond knowing that she was the mesmerist's only child, and having heard something about her having some gift—she couldn't remember which it was. Oh, if she was his child, she would be sure to have some gift—if it was only the gift of the g ——well, she didn't mean to say that; but a talent for conversation. Perhaps she could die and come to life again; perhaps she would show them her gift, as no one seemed inclined to do anything. Yes, she was pretty-appearing, but there was a certain indication of anemia, and Doctor Prance would be surprised if she didn't eat too much candy. Basil thought she had an engaging exterior; it was his private reflection, colored doubtless by "sectional" prejudice, that she was the first pretty girl he had seen in Boston. She was talking with some ladies at the other end of the room; and she had a large red fan, which she kept constantly in movement. She was not a quiet girl; she fidgeted, was restless, while she talked, and had the air of a person who, whatever she might be doing, would wish to be doing something else. If people watched her a good deal, she also returned their contemplation, and her charming eyes had several times encountered those of Basil Ransom. But they wandered mainly in the direction of Mrs. Farrinder—they lingered upon the serene solidity of the great oratress. It was easy to see that the girl admired this beneficent woman, and felt it a privilege to be near her. It was apparent, indeed, that she was excited by the company in which she found herself; a fact to be explained by a reference to that recent period of exile in the West, of which we have had a hint, and in consequence of which the present occasion may have seemed to her a return to intellectual life. Ransom secretly wished that his cousin—since fate was to reserve for him a cousin in Boston—had been more like that.

By this time a certain agitation was perceptible; several ladies, impatient of vain delay, had left their places, to appeal personally to Mrs. Farrinder, who was presently surrounded with sympathetic remonstrants. Miss Birdseye had given her up; it had been enough for Miss Birdseye that she should have said, when pressed (so far as her hostess, muffled in laxity, could press) on the subject of the general expectation, that she could only deliver her message to an audience which she felt to be partially hostile. There was no hostility there; they were all only too much in sympathy. "I don't require sympathy," she said, with a tranquil smile, to Olive Chancellor; "I am only myself, I only rise to the occasion, when I see prejudice, when I see bigotry, when I see injustice, when I see conservatism, massed before me like an army. Then I feel—I feel as I imagine Napoleon Bonaparte to have felt on the eve of one of his great victories. I *must* have unfriendly elements—I like to win them over."

Olive thought of Basil Ransom, and wondered whether he would do for an unfriendly element. She mentioned him to Mrs. Farrinder, who expressed an earnest hope that if he were opposed to the principles which were so dear to the rest of them, he might be induced to take the floor and testify on his own account. "I should be so happy to answer him," said Mrs. Farrinder, with supreme softness. "I should be so glad, at any rate, to exchange ideas with him." Olive felt a deep alarm at the idea of a public dispute between these two vigorous people (she had a perception that Ransom would be vigorous), not because she doubted of the happy issue, but because she herself would be in a false position, as having brought the offensive young man, and she had a horror of false positions. Miss Birdseye was incapable of resentment; she had invited forty people to hear Mrs. Farrinder speak, and now Mrs. Farrinder wouldn't speak. But she had such a beautiful reason for it! There was something martial and heroic in her pretext, and, besides, it was so characteristic, so free, that Miss Birdseye was quite consoled, and wandered away, looking at her other guests vaguely, as if she didn't know them from each other, while she mentioned to them, at a venture, the excuse for their disappointment, confident, evidently, that they would agree with her it was very fine. "But we can't pretend to be on the other side, just to start her up, can we?" she asked of Mr. Tarrant, who sat there beside his wife with a rather conscious but by no means complacent air of isolation from the rest of the company.

"Well, I don't know—I guess we are all solid here," this gentleman replied, looking round him with a slow, deliberate smile, which made his mouth enormous, developed two wrinkles, as long as the wings of a bat, on either side of it, and showed a set of big, even, carnivorous teeth.

"Selah," said his wife, laying her hand on the sleeve of his waterproof, "I wonder whether Miss Birdseye would be interested to hear Verena."

"Well, if you mean she sings, it's a shame I haven't got a piano," Miss Birdseye took upon herself to respond. It came back to her that the girl had a gift.

"She doesn't want a piano—she doesn't want anything," Selah remarked, giving no apparent attention

to his wife. It was a part of his attitude in life never to appear to be indebted to another person for a suggestion, never to be surprised or unprepared.

"Well, I don't know that the interest in singing is so general," said Miss Birdseye, quite unconscious of any slackness in preparing a substitute for the entertainment that had failed her.

"It isn't singing, you'll see," Mrs. Tarrant declared.

"What is it, then?"

Mr. Tarrant unfurled his wrinkles, showed his back teeth. "It's inspirational."

Miss Birdseye gave a small, vague, unskeptical laugh. "Well, if you can guarantee that——"

"I think it would be acceptable," said Mrs. Tarrant; and putting up a half-gloved, familiar hand, she drew Miss Birdseye down to her, and the pair explained in alternation what it was their child could do.

Meanwhile, Basil Ransom confessed to Doctor Prance that he was, after all, rather disappointed. He had expected more of a program; he wanted to hear some of the new truths. Mrs. Farrinder, as he said, remained within her tent, and he had hoped not only to see these distinguished people but also to listen to them.

"Well, *I* ain't disappointed," the sturdy little doctress replied. "If any question had been opened, I suppose I should have had to stay."

"But I presume you don't propose to retire."

"Well, I've got to pursue my studies sometime. I don't want the gentlemen-doctors to get ahead of me."

"Oh, no one will ever get ahead of you, I'm very sure. And there is that pretty young lady going over to speak to Mrs. Farrinder. She's going to beg her for a speech—Mrs. Farrinder can't resist that."

"Well, then, I'll just trickle out before she begins. Good night, sir," said Doctor Prance, who by this time had begun to appear to Ransom more susceptible of domestication, as if she had been a small forest creature, a catamount or a ruffled doe, that had learned to stand still while you stroked it, or even to extend a paw. She ministered to health, and she was healthy herself; if his cousin could have been even of this type Basil would have felt himself more fortunate.

"Good night, Doctor," he replied. "You haven't told me, after all, your opinion of the capacity of the ladies."

"Capacity for what?" said Doctor Prance. "They've got a capacity for making people waste time. All I know is that I don't want any one to tell *me* what a lady can do!" And she edged away from him softly, as if she had been traversing a hospital ward, and presently he saw her reach the door, which, with the arrival of the later comers, had remained open. She stood there an instant, turning over the whole assembly a glance like the flash of a watchman's bull's-eye, and then quickly passed out. Ransom could see that she was impatient of the general question and bored with being reminded, even for the sake of her rights, that she was a woman—a detail that she was in the habit of forgetting, having as many rights as she had time for. It was certain that whatever might become of the movement at large, Doctor Prance's own little revolution was a success.

She had no sooner left him than Olive Chancellor came toward him with eyes that seemed to say, "I don't care whether you are here now or not—I'm all right!" But what her lips said was much more gracious; she asked him if she mightn't have the pleasure of introducing him to Mrs. Farrinder. Ransom consented, with a little of his Southern flourish, and in a moment the lady got up to receive him from the midst of the circle that now surrounded her. It was an occasion for her to justify her reputation of an elegant manner, and it must be impartially related that she struck Ransom as having a dignity in conversation and a command of the noble style which could not have been surpassed by a daughter—one of the most accomplished, most far-descended daughters—of his own latitude. It was as if she had known that he was not eager for the changes she advocated, and wished to show him that, especially to a Southerner who had bitten the dust, her sex could be magnanimous. This knowledge of his secret heresy seemed to him to be also in the faces of the other ladies, whose circumspect glances, however (for he had not been introduced), treated it as a pity rather than as a shame. He was conscious of all these middle-aged feminine eyes, conscious of curls, rather limp, that depended from dusky bonnets, of heads poked forward, as if with a waiting, listening, familiar habit, of no one being very bright or gay—no one, at least, but that girl he had noticed before, who had a brilliant head, and who now hovered on the edge of the conclave. He met her eye again; she was watching him too. It had been in his thoughts that Mrs. Farrinder, to whom his cousin might have betrayed or misrepresented him, would perhaps defy him to combat, and he wondered whether he could pull himself together (he was extremely embarrassed) sufficiently to do honor to such a challenge. If she would fling down the glove on the temperance question, it seemed to him that it would be in him to pick it up; for the idea of a meddling legislation on this subject filled him with rage; the taste of liquor being good to him, and his conviction strong that civilization itself would be in danger if it should fall into the power of a herd of vociferating women (I am but the reporter of his angry *formulæ*) to prevent a gentleman from taking his glass. Mrs. Farrinder proved to him that she had not the eagerness of insecurity; she asked him if he wouldn't like to give the company some account of the social and political condition of the South. He begged to be excused, expressing at the same time a high sense of the honor done him by such a request, while he smiled to himself at the idea of his extemporizing a lecture. He smiled even while he suspected the meaning of the look Miss Chancellor gave him: "Well, you are not of much account after all!" To talk to those people about the South—if they could have guessed how little he cared to do it! He had a passionate tenderness for his own country, and a sense of intimate connection with it which would have made it as impossible for him to take a roomful of Northern fanatics into his confidence as to read aloud his mother's or his mistress's letters. To be quiet about the Southern land, not to touch her with vulgar hands, to leave her alone with her wounds and her memories, not prating in the market place either of her troubles or her hopes, but waiting as a man should wait, for the slow process, the sensible beneficence, of time—this was the desire of Ransom's heart, and he was aware of how little it could minister to the entertainment of Miss Birdseye's guests.

"We know so little about the women of the South; they are very voiceless," Mrs. Farrinder remarked. "How much can we count upon them? in what numbers would they flock to our standard? I have been recommended not to lecture in the Southern cities."

"Ah, madam, that was very cruel advice—for us!" Basil Ransom exclaimed, with gallantry.

"*I* had a magnificent audience last spring in St. Louis," a fresh young voice announced, over the heads of the gathered group—a voice which, on Basil's turning, like everyone else, for an explanation, appeared to have proceeded from the pretty girl with red hair. She had colored a little with the effort of making this declaration, and she stood there smiling at her listeners.

Mrs. Farrinder bent a benignant brow upon her, in spite of her being, evidently, rather a surprise. "Oh, indeed; and your subject, my dear young lady?"

"The past history, the present condition, and the future prospects of our sex."

"Oh, well, St. Louis—that's scarcely the South," said one of the ladies.

"I'm sure the young lady would have had equal success at Charleston or New Orleans," Basil Ransom interposed.

"Well, I wanted to go farther," the girl continued, "but I had no friends. I have friends in St. Louis."

"You oughtn't to want for them anywhere," said Mrs. Farrinder, in a manner which, by this time, had quite explained her reputation. "I am acquainted with the loyalty of St. Louis."

"Well, after that, you must let me introduce Miss Tarrant; she's perfectly dying to know you, Mrs. Farrinder." These words emanated from one of the gentlemen, the young man with white hair, who had

been mentioned to Ransom by Doctor Prance as a celebrated magazinist. He, too, up to this moment, had hovered in the background, but he now gently clove the assembly (several of the ladies made way for him), leading in the daughter of the mesmerist.

She laughed and continued to blush—her blush was the faintest pink; she looked very young and slim and fair as Mrs. Farrinder made way for her on the sofa which Olive Chancellor had quitted. "I *have* wanted to know you; I admire you so much; I hoped so you would speak tonight. It's too lovely to see you, Mrs. Farrinder." So she expressed herself, while the company watched the encounter with a look of refreshed inanition. "You don't know who I am, of course; I'm just a girl who wants to thank you for all you have done for us. For you have spoken for us girls, just as much as—just as much as——" She hesitated now, looking about with enthusiastic eyes at the rest of the group, and meeting once more the gaze of Basil Ransom.

"Just as much as for the old women," said Mrs. Farrinder, genially. "You seem very well able to speak for yourself."

"She speaks so beautifully—if she would only make a little address," the young man who had introduced her remarked. "It's a new style, quite original," he added. He stood there with folded arms, looking down at his work, the conjunction of the two ladies, with a smile; and Basil Ransom, remembering what Miss Prance had told him, and enlightened by his observation in New York of some of the sources from which newspapers are fed, was immediately touched by the conviction that he perceived in it the material of a paragraph.

"My dear child, if you'll take the floor, I'll call the meeting to order," said Mrs. Farrinder.

The girl looked at her with extraordinary candor and confidence. "If I could only hear you first—just to give me an atmosphere."

"I've got no atmosphere; there's very little of the Indian summer about *me!* I deal with facts—hard facts," Mrs. Farrinder replied. "Have you ever heard me? If so, you know how crisp I am."

"Heard you? I've lived on you! It's so much to me to see you. Ask mother if it isn't!" She had expressed herself, from the first word she uttered, with a promptness and assurance which gave almost the impression of a lesson rehearsed in advance. And yet there was a strange spontaneity in her manner, and an air of artless enthusiasm, of personal purity. If she was theatrical, she was naturally theatrical. She looked up at Mrs. Farrinder with all her emotion in her smiling eyes. This lady had been the object of many ovations; it was familiar to her that the collective heart of her sex had gone forth to her; but, visibly, she was puzzled by this unforeseen embodiment of gratitude and fluency, and her eyes wandered over the girl with a certain reserve, while, within the depth of her eminently public manner, she asked herself whether Miss Tarrant were a remarkable young woman or only a forward minx. She found a response which committed her to neither view; she only said, "We want the young—of course we want the young!"

"Who is that charming creature?" Basil Ransom heard his cousin ask, in a grave, lowered tone, of Matthias Pardon, the young man who had brought Miss Tarrant forward. He didn't know whether Miss Chancellor knew him, or whether her curiosity had pushed her to boldness. Ransom was near the pair, and had the benefit of Mr. Pardon's answer.

"The daughter of Doctor Tarrant, the mesmeric healer —Miss Verena. She's a high-class speaker."

"What do you mean?" Olive asked. "Does she give public addresses?"

"Oh yes, she has had quite a career in the West. I heard her last spring at Topeka. They call it inspirational. I don't know what it is—only it's exquisite; so fresh and poetical. She has to have her father to start her up. It seems to pass into her." And Mr. Pardon indulged in a gesture intended to signify the passage.

Olive Chancellor made no rejoinder save a low, impatient sigh; she transferred her attention to the girl, who now held Mrs. Farrinder's hand in both her own, and was pleading with her just to prelude a little. "I want a starting-point—I want to know where I am," she said. "Just two or three of your grand old thoughts."

Basil stepped nearer to his cousin; he remarked to her that Miss Verena was very pretty. She turned an instant, glanced at him, and then said, "Do you think so?" An instant later she added, "How you must hate this place!"

"Oh, not now, we are going to have some fun," Ransom replied good-humoredly, if a trifle coarsely; and the declaration had a point, for Miss Birdseye at this moment reappeared, followed by the mesmeric healer and his wife.

"Ah, well, I see you are drawing her out," said Miss Birdseye to Mrs. Farrinder; and at the idea that this process had been necessary Basil Ransom broke into a smothered hilarity, a spasm which indicated that, for him, the fun had already begun, and procured him another grave glance from Miss Chancellor. Miss Verena seemed to him as far "out" as a young woman could be. "Here's her father, Doctor Tarrant—he has a wonderful gift—and her mother—she was a daughter of Abraham Greenstreet." Miss Birdseye presented her companion; she was sure Mrs. Farrinder would be interested; she wouldn't want to lose an opportunity, even if for herself the conditions were not favorable. And then Miss Birdseye addressed herself to the company more at large, widening the circle so as to take in the most scattered guests, and

evidently feeling that after all it was a relief that one happened to have an obscurely inspired maiden on the premises when greater celebrities had betrayed the whimsicality of genius. It was a part of this whimsicality that Mrs. Farrinder—the reader may find it difficult to keep pace with her variations—appeared now to have decided to utter a few of her thoughts, so that her hostess could elicit a general response to the remark that it would be delightful to have both the old school and the new.

"Well, perhaps you'll be disappointed in Verena," said Mrs. Tarrant, with an air of dolorous resignation to any event, and seating herself, with her gathered mantle, on the edge of a chair, as if she, at least, were ready, whoever else might keep on talking.

"It isn't *me,* mother," Verena rejoined, with soft gravity, rather detached now from Mrs. Farrinder, and sitting with her eyes fixed thoughtfully on the ground. With deference to Mrs Tarrant, a little more talk was necessary, for the young lady had as yet been insufficiently explained. Miss Birdseye felt this, but she was rather helpless about it, and delivered herself, with her universal familiarity, which embraced everyone and everything, of a wandering, amiable tale, in which Abraham Greenstreet kept reappearing, in which Doctor Tarrant's miraculous cures were specified, with all the facts wanting, and in which Verena's successes in the West were related, not with emphasis or hyperbole, in which Miss Birdseye never indulged, but as accepted and recognized wonders, natural in an age of new revelations. She had heard of these things in detail only ten minutes before, from the girl's parents, but her hospitable soul had needed but a moment to swallow and assimilate them. If her account of them was not very lucid, it should be said in excuse for her that it was impossible to have any idea of Verena Tarrant unless one had heard her, and therefore still more impossible to give an idea to others. Mrs. Farrinder was perceptibly irritated; she appeared to have made up her mind, after her first hesitation, that the Tarrant family were fantastical and compromising. She had bent an eye of coldness on Selah and his wife—she might have regarded them all as a company of mountebanks.

"Stand up and tell us what you have to say," she remarked, with some sternness, to Verena, who only raised her eyes to her, silently now, with the same sweetness, and then rested them on her father. This gentleman seemed to respond to an irresistible appeal; he looked round at the company with all his teeth, and said that these flattering allusions were not so embarrassing as they might otherwise be, inasmuch as any success that he and his daughter might have had was so thoroughly impersonal: he insisted on that word. They had just heard her say, "It is not *me,* mother," and he and Mrs. Tarrant and the girl herself were all equally aware it was not she. It was some power outside—it seemed to flow through her; he couldn't pretend to say why his daughter should be called, more than any one else. But it seemed as if she *was* called. When he just calmed her down by laying his hand on her a few moments, it seemed to come. It so happened that in the West it had taken the form of a considerable eloquence. She had certainly spoken with great facility to cultivated and high-minded audiences. She had long followed with sympathy the movement for the liberation of her sex from every sort of bondage; it had been her principal interest even as a child (he might mention that at the age of nine she had christened her favorite doll Eliza P. Moseley, in memory of a great precursor whom they all reverenced), and now the inspiration, if he might call it so, seemed just to flow in that channel. The voice that spoke from her lips seemed to want to take that form. It didn't seem as if it *could* take any other. She let it come out just as it would—she didn't pretend to have any control. They could judge for themselves whether the whole thing was not quite unique. That was why he was willing to talk about his own child that way, before a gathering of ladies and gentlemen; it was because they took no credit—they felt it was a power outside. If Verena felt she was going to be stimulated that evening, he was pretty sure they would be interested. Only he should have to request a few moments' silence, while she listened for the voice.

Several of the ladies declared that they should be delighted —they hoped that Miss Tarrant was in good trim; whereupon they were corrected by others, who reminded them that it wasn't *her*—she had nothing to do with it—so her trim didn't matter; and a gentleman added that he guessed there were many present who had conversed with Eliza P. Moseley. Meanwhile Verena, more and more withdrawn into herself, but perfectly undisturbed by the public discussion of her mystic faculty, turned yet again, very prettily, to Mrs. Farrinder, and asked her if she wouldn't strike out—just to give her courage. By this time Mrs. Farrinder was in a condition of overhanging gloom; she greeted the charming suppliant with the frown of Juno. She disapproved completely of Doctor Tarrant's little speech, and she had less and less disposition to be associated with a miracle-monger. Abraham Greenstreet was very well, but Abraham Greenstreet was in his grave; and Eliza P. Moseley, after, all, had been very tepid. Basil Ransom wondered whether it were effrontery or innocence that enabled Miss Tarrant to meet with such complacency the aloofness of the elder lady. At this moment he heard Olive Chancellor, at his elbow, with the tremor of excitement in her tone, suddenly exclaim: "Please begin, please begin! A voice, a human voice, is what we want."

"I'll speak after you, and if you're a humbug, I'll expose you!" Mrs. Farrinder said. She was more majestic than facetious.

"I'm sure we are all solid, as Doctor Tarrant says. I suppose we want to be quiet," Miss Birdseye remarked.

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Verena Tarrant got up and went to her father in the middle of the room; Olive Chancellor crossed and resumed her place beside Mrs. Farrinder on the sofa the girl had quitted; and Miss Birdseye's visitors, for the rest, settled themselves attentively in chairs or leaned against the bare sides of the parlor. Verena took her father's hands, held them for a moment, while she stood before him, not looking at him, with her eyes toward the company; then, after an instant, her mother, rising, pushed forward, with an interesting sigh, the chair on which she had been sitting. Mrs. Tarrant was provided with another seat, and Verena, relinquishing her father's grasp, placed herself in the chair, which Tarrant put in position for her. She sat there with closed eyes, and her father now rested his long, lean hands upon her head. Basil Ransom watched these proceedings with much interest, for the girl amused and pleased him. She had far more color than any one there, for whatever brightness was to be found in Miss Birdseye's rather faded and dingy human collection had gathered itself into this attractive but ambiguous young person. There was nothing ambiguous, by the way, about her confederate; Ransom simply loathed him, from the moment he opened his mouth; he was intensely familiar—that is, his type was; he was simply the detested carpetbagger. He was false, cunning, vulgar, ignoble; the cheapest kind of human product. That he should be the father of a delicate, pretty girl, who was apparently clever too, whether she had a gift or no, this was an annoying, disconcerting fact. The white, puffy mother, with the high forehead, in the corner there, looked more like a lady; but if she were one, it was all the more shame to her to have mated with such a varlet, Ransom said to himself, making use, as he did generally, of terms of opprobrium extracted from the older English literature. He had seen Tarrant, or his equivalent, often before; he had "whipped" him, as he believed, controversially, again and again, at political meetings in blighted Southern towns, during the horrible period of reconstruction. If Mrs. Farrinder had looked at Verena Tarrant as if she were a mountebank, there was some excuse for it, inasmuch as the girl made much the same impression on Basil Ransom. He had never seen such an odd mixture of elements; she had the sweetest, most unworldly face, and yet, with it, an air of being on exhibition, of belonging to a troupe, of living in the gaslight, which pervaded even the details of her dress, fashioned evidently with an attempt at the histrionic. If she had produced a pair of castanets or a tambourine, he felt that such accessories would have been quite in keeping.

Little Doctor Prance, with her hard good sense, had noted that she was anemic, and had intimated that she was a deceiver. The value of her performance was yet to be proved, but she was certainly very pale, white as women are who have that shade of red hair; they look as if their blood had gone into it. There was, however, something rich in the fairness of this young lady; she was strong and supple, there was color in her lips and eyes, and her tresses, gathered into a complicated coil, seemed to glow with the brightness of her nature. She had curious, radiant, liquid eyes (their smile was a sort of reflection, like the glisten of a gem), and though she was not tall, she appeared to spring up, and carried her head as if it reached rather high. Ransom would have thought she looked like an Oriental, if it were not that Orientals are dark; and if she had only had a goat she would have resembled Esmeralda, though he had but a vague recollection of who Esmeralda had been. She wore a light-brown dress, of a shape that struck him as fantastic, a yellow petticoat, and a large crimson sash fastened at the side; while round her neck, and falling low upon her flat young chest, she had a double chain of amber beads. It must be added that, in spite of her melodramatic appearance, there was no symptom that her performance, whatever it was, would be of a melodramatic character. She was very quiet now, at least (she had folded her big fan), and her father continued the mysterious process of calming her down. Ransom wondered whether he wouldn't put her to sleep; for some minutes her eyes had remained closed; he heard a lady near him, apparently familiar with phenomena of this class, remark that she was going off. As yet the exhibition was not exciting, though it was certainly pleasant to have such a pretty girl placed there before one, like a moving statue. Doctor Tarrant looked at no one as he stroked and soothed his daughter; his eyes wandered round the cornice of the room, and he grinned upward, as if at an imaginary gallery. "Quietly—quietly," he murmured, from time to time. "It will come, my good child, it will come. Just let it work—just let it gather. The spirit, you know; you've got to let the spirit come out when it will." He threw up his arms at moments, to rid himself of the wings of his long waterproof, which fell forward over his hands. Basil Ransom noticed all these things, and noticed also, opposite, the waiting face of his cousin, fixed, from her sofa, upon the closed eyes of the young prophetess. He grew more impatient at last, not of the delay of the edifying voice (though some time had elapsed), but of Tarrant's grotesque manipulations, which he resented as much as if he himself had felt their touch, and which seemed a dishonor to the passive maiden.

They made him nervous, they made him angry, and it was only afterwards that he asked himself wherein they concerned him, and whether even a carpetbagger hadn't a right to do what he pleased with his daughter. It was a relief to him when Verena got up from her chair, with a movement which made Tarrant drop into the background as if his part were now over. She stood there with a quiet face, serious and sightless; then, after a short further delay, she began to speak.

She began incoherently, almost inaudibly, as if she were talking in a dream. Ransom could not understand her; he thought it very queer, and wondered what Doctor Prance would have said. "She's just arranging her ideas, and trying to get in report; she'll come out all right." This remark he heard dropped in a low tone by the mesmeric healer; "in report" was apparently Tarrant's version of *en rapport*. His prophecy was verified, and Verena did come out, after a little; she came out with a great deal of sweetness—with a very quaint and peculiar effect. She proceeded slowly, cautiously, as if she were listening for the prompter, catching, one by one, certain phrases that were whispered to her a great distance off, behind the scenes of the world. Then memory, or inspiration, returned to her, and presently she was in possession of her part. She played it with extraordinary simplicity and grace; at the end of ten minutes Ransom became aware that the whole audience—Mrs. Farrinder, Miss Chancellor, and the tough subject from Mississippi—were under the charm. I speak of ten minutes, but to tell the truth the young man lost all sense of time. He wondered afterwards how long she had spoken; then he counted that her strange, sweet, crude, absurd, enchanting improvisation must have lasted half an hour. It was not what she said; he didn't care for that, he scarcely understood it; he could only see that it was all about the gentleness and goodness of women, and how, during the long ages of history, they had been trampled under the iron heel of man. It was about their equality—perhaps even (he was not definitely conscious) about their superiority. It was about their day having come at last, about the universal sisterhood, about their duty to themselves and to each other. It was about such matters as these, and Basil Ransom was delighted to observe that such matters as these didn't spoil it. The effect was not in what she said, though she said some such pretty things, but in the picture and figure of the half-bedizened damsel (playing, now again, with her red fan), the visible freshness and purity of the little effort. When she had gained confidence she opened her eyes, and their shining softness was half the effect of her discourse. It was full of schoolgirl phrases, of patches of remembered eloquence, of childish lapses of logic, of flights of fancy which might indeed have had success at Topeka; but Ransom thought that if it had been much worse it would have been quite as good, for the argument, the doctrine, had absolutely nothing to do with it. It was simply an intensely personal exhibition, and the person making it happened to be fascinating. She might have offended the taste of certain people—Ransom could imagine that there were other Boston circles in which she would be thought pert; but for himself all he could feel was that to *his* starved senses she irresistibly appealed. He was the stiffest of conservatives, and his mind was steeled against the inanities she uttered—the rights and wrongs of women, the equality of the sexes, the hysterics of conventions, the further stultification of the suffrage, the prospect of conscript mothers in the national Senate. It made no difference; she didn't mean it, she didn't know what she meant, she had been stuffed with this trash by her father, and she was neither more nor less willing to say it than to say anything else; for the necessity of her nature was not to make converts to a ridiculous cause, but to emit those charming notes of her voice, to stand in those free young attitudes, to shake her braided locks like a naiad rising from the waves, to please every one who came near her, and to be happy that she pleased. I know not whether Ransom was aware of the bearings of this interpretation, which attributed to Miss Tarrant a singular hollowness of character; he contented himself with believing that she was as innocent as she was lovely, and with regarding her as a vocalist of exquisite faculty, condemned to sing bad music. How prettily, indeed, she made some of it sound!

"Of course I only speak to women—to my own dear sisters; I don't speak to men, for I don't expect them to like what I say. They pretend to admire us very much, but I should like them to admire us a little less and to trust us a little more. I don't know what we have ever done to them that they should keep us out of everything. We have trusted *them* too much, and I think the time has come now for us to judge them, and say that by keeping us out we don't think they have done so well. When I look around me at the world, and at the state that men have brought it to, I confess I say to myself, 'Well, if women had fixed it this way I should like to know what they would think of it!' When I see the dreadful misery of mankind and think of the suffering of which at any hour, at any moment, the world is full, I say that if this is the best they can do by themselves, they had better let us come in a little and see what *we* can do. We couldn't possibly make it worse, could we? If we had done only this, we shouldn't boast of it. Poverty, and ignorance, and crime; disease, and wickedness, and wars! Wars, always more wars, and always more and more. Blood, blood—the world is drenched with blood! To kill each other, with all sorts of expensive and perfected instruments, that is the most brilliant thing they have been able to invent. It seems to me that we might stop it, we might invent something better. The cruelty—the cruelty; there is so much, so much! Why shouldn't tenderness come in? Why should our woman's hearts be so full of it, and all so wasted and withered, while armies and prisons and helpless miseries grow greater all the while? I am only a girl, a simple American girl, and of course I haven't seen much, and there is a great deal of life that I don't know anything about. But there are some things I feel—it seems to me as if I had been born to feel them; they

are in my ears in the stillness of the night and before my face in the visions of the darkness. It is what the great sisterhood of women might do if they should all join hands, and lift up their voices above the brutal uproar of the world, in which it is so hard for the plea of mercy or of justice, the moan of weakness and suffering, to be heard. We should quench it, we should make it still, and the sound of our lips would become the voice of universal peace! For this we must trust one another, we must be true and gentle and kind. We must remember that the world is ours too, ours —little as we have ever had to say about anything!—and that the question is *not* yet definitely settled whether it shall be a place of injustice or a place of love!"

It was with this that the young lady finished her harangue, which was not followed by her sinking exhausted into her chair or by any of the traces of a labored climax. She only turned away slowly towards her mother, smiling over her shoulder at the whole room, as if it had been a single person, without a flush in her whiteness, or the need of drawing a longer breath. The performance had evidently been very easy to her, and there might have been a kind of impertinence in her air of not having suffered from an exertion which had wrought so powerfully on every one else. Ransom broke into a genial laugh, which he instantly swallowed again, at the sweet grotesqueness of this virginal creature's standing up before a company of middle-aged people to talk to them about "love," the note on which she had closed her harangue. It was the most charming touch in the whole thing, and the most vivid proof of her innocence. She had had immense success, and Mrs. Tarrant, as she took her into her arms and kissed her, was certainly able to feel that the audience was not disappointed. They were exceedingly affected; they broke into exclamations and murmurs. Selah Tarrant went on conversing ostentatiously with his neighbors, slowly twirling his long thumbs and looking up at the cornice again, as if there could be nothing in the brilliant manner in which his daughter had acquitted herself to surprise *him,* who had heard her when she was still more remarkable, and who, moreover, remembered that the affair was so impersonal. Miss Birdseye looked round at the company with dim exultation; her large mild cheeks were shining with unwiped tears. Young Mr. Pardon remarked, in Ransom's hearing, that he knew parties who, if they had been present, would want to engage Miss Verena at a high figure for the winter campaign. And Ransom heard him add in a lower tone: "There's money for some one in that girl; you see if she don't have quite a run!" As for our Mississippian he kept his agreeable sensation for himself, only wondering whether he might not ask Miss Birdseye to present him to the heroine of the evening. Not immediately, of course, for the young man mingled with his Southern pride a shyness which often served all the purpose of humility. He was aware how much he was an outsider in such a house as that, and he was ready to wait for his coveted satisfaction till the others, who all hung together, should have given her the assurance of an approval which she would value, naturally, more than anything he could say to her. This episode had imparted animation to the assembly; a certain gaiety, even, expressed in a higher pitch of conversation, seemed to float in the heated air. People circulated more freely, and Verena Tarrant was presently hidden from Ransom's sight by the close-pressed ranks of the new friends she had made. "Well, I never heard it put *that* way!" Ransom heard one of the ladies exclaim; to which another replied that she wondered one of their bright women hadn't thought of it before. "Well, it *is* a gift, and no mistake," and "Well, they may call it what they please, it's a pleasure to listen to it"—these genial tributes fell from the lips of a pair of ruminating gentlemen. It was affirmed within Ransom's hearing that if they had a few more like that the matter would soon be fixed; and it was rejoined that they couldn't expect to have a great many—the style was so peculiar. It was generally admitted that the style was peculiar, but Miss Tarrant's peculiarity was the explanation of her success.

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Ransom approached Mrs. Farrinder again, who had remained on her sofa with Olive Chancellor; and as she turned her face to him he saw that she had felt the universal contagion. Her keen eye sparkled, there was a flush on her matronly cheek, and she had evidently made up her mind what line to take. Olive Chancellor sat motionless; her eyes were fixed on the floor with the rigid, alarmed expression of her moments of nervous diffidence; she gave no sign of observing her kinsman's approach. He said something to Mrs. Farrinder, something that imperfectly represented his admiration of Verena; and this lady replied with dignity that it was no wonder the girl spoke so well—she spoke in such a good cause. "She is very graceful, has a fine command of language; her father says it's a natural gift." Ransom saw that he should not in the least discover Mrs. Farrinder's real opinion, and her dissimulation added to his impression that she was a woman with a policy. It was none of his business whether in her heart she thought Verena a parrot or a genius; it was perceptible to him that she saw she would be effective, would help the cause. He stood almost appalled for a moment, as he said to himself that she would take her up and the girl would be ruined, would force her note and become a screamer. But he quickly dodged this vision, taking refuge in a mechanical appeal to his cousin, of whom he inquired how she liked Miss Verena. Olive made no answer; her head remained averted, she bored the carpet with her conscious eyes. Mrs. Farrinder glanced at her askance, and then said to Ransom serenely:

"You praise the grace of your Southern ladies, but you have had to come North to see a human gazelle. Miss Tarrant is of the best New England stock—what *I* call the best!"

"I'm sure from what I have seen of the Boston ladies, no manifestation of grace can excite my surprise," Ransom rejoined, looking, with his smile, at his cousin.

"She has been powerfully affected," Mrs. Farrinder explained, very slightly dropping her voice, as Olive, apparently, still remained deaf.

Miss Birdseye drew near at this moment; she wanted to know if Mrs. Farrinder didn't want to express some acknowledgment, on the part of the company at large, for the real stimulus Miss Tarrant had given them. Mrs. Farrinder said: Oh yes, she would speak now with pleasure; only she must have a glass of water first. Miss Birdseye replied that there was some coming in a moment; one of the ladies had asked for it, and Mr. Pardon had just stepped down to draw some. Basil took advantage of this intermission to ask Miss Birdseye if she would give him the great privilege of an introduction to Miss Verena. "Mrs. Farrinder will thank her for the company," he said, laughing, "but she won't thank her for me."

Miss Birdseye manifested the greatest disposition to oblige him; she was so glad he had been impressed. She was proceeding to lead him toward Miss Tarrant when Olive Chancellor rose abruptly from her chair and laid her hand, with an arresting movement, on the arm of the hostess. She explained to her that she must go, that she was not very well, that her carriage was there; also that she hoped Miss Birdseye, if it was not asking too much, would accompany her to the door.

"Well, you are impressed too," said Miss Birdseye, looking at her philosophically. "It seems as if no one had escaped."

Ransom was disappointed; he saw he was going to be taken away, and, before he could suppress it, an exclamation burst from his lips—the first exclamation he could think of that would perhaps check his cousin's retreat: "Ah, Miss Olive, are you going to give up Mrs. Farrinder?"

At this Miss Olive looked at him, showed him an extraordinary face, a face he scarcely understood or even recognized. It was portentously grave, the eyes were enlarged, there was a red spot in each of the cheeks, and as directed to him, a quick, piercing question, a kind of leaping challenge, in the whole expression. He could only answer this sudden gleam with a stare, and wonder afresh what trick his Northern kinswoman was destined to play him. Impressed too? He should think he had been! Mrs. Farrinder, who was decidedly a woman of the world, came to his assistance, or to Miss Chancellor's, and said she hoped very much Olive wouldn't stay—she felt these things too much. "If you stay, I won't speak," she added; "I should upset you altogether." And then she continued, tenderly, for so preponderantly intellectual a nature: "When women feel as you do, how can I doubt that we shall come out all right?"

"Oh, we shall come out all right, I guess," murmured Miss Birdseye.

"But you must remember Beacon Street," Mrs. Farrinder subjoined. "You must take advantage of your position —you must wake up the Back Bay!"

"I'm sick of the Back Bay!" said Olive fiercely; and she passed to the door with Miss Birdseye, bidding good-by to no one. She was so agitated that, evidently, she could not trust herself, and there was nothing for Ransom but to follow. At the door of the room, however, he was checked by a sudden pause on the

part of the two ladies: Olive stopped and stood there hesitating. She looked round the room and spied out Verena, where she sat with her mother, the center of a gratified group; then, throwing back her head with an air of decision, she crossed over to her. Ransom said to himself that now, perhaps, was his chance, and he quickly accompanied Miss Chancellor. The little knot of reformers watched her as she arrived; their faces expressed a suspicion of her social importance, mingled with conscientious scruples as to whether it were right to recognize it. Verena Tarrant saw that she was the object of this manifestation, and she got up to meet the lady whose approach was so full of point. Ransom perceived, however, or thought he perceived, that she recognized nothing; she had no suspicions of social importance. Yet she smiled with all her radiance, as she looked from Miss Chancellor to him; smiled because she liked to smile, to please, to feel her success—or was it because she was a perfect little actress, and this was part of her training? She took the hand that Olive put out to her; the others, rather solemnly, sat looking up from their chairs.

"You don't know me, but I want to know you," Olive said. "I can thank you now. Will you come and see me?"

"Oh yes; where do you live?" Verena answered, in the tone of a girl for whom an invitation (she hadn't so many) was always an invitation.

Miss Chancellor syllabled her address, and Mrs. Tarrant came forward, smiling. "I know about you, Miss Chancellor. I guess your father knew my father—Mr. Greenstreet. Verena will be very glad to visit you. We shall be very happy to see you in *our* home."

Basil Ransom, while the mother spoke, wanted to say something to the daughter, who stood there so near him, but he could think of nothing that would do; certain words that came to him, his Mississippi phrases, seemed patronizing and ponderous. Besides, he didn't wish to assent to what she had said; he wished simply to tell her she was delightful, and it was difficult to mark that difference. So he only smiled at her in silence, and she smiled back at him—a smile that seemed to him quite for himself.

"Where do you live?" Olive asked; and Mrs. Tarrant replied that they lived at Cambridge, and that the horsecars passed just near their door. Whereupon Olive insisted "Will you come very soon?" and Verena said, Oh yes, she would come very soon, and repeated the number in Charles Street, to show that she had taken heed of it. This was done with childlike good faith. Ransom saw that she would come and see anyone who would ask her like that, and he regretted for a minute that he was not a Boston lady, so that he might extend to her such an invitation. Olive Chancellor held her hand a moment longer, looked at her in farewell, and then, saying, "Come, Mr. Ransom," drew him out of the room. In the hall they met Mr. Pardon, coming up from the lower regions with a jug of water and a tumbler. Miss Chancellor's hackney coach was there, and when Basil had put her into it she said to him that she wouldn't trouble him to drive with her—his hotel was not near Charles Street. He had so little desire to sit by her side—he wanted to smoke—that it was only after the vehicle had rolled off that he reflected upon her coolness, and asked himself why the deuce she had brought him away. She *was* a very odd cousin, was this Boston cousin of his. He stood there a moment, looking at the light in Miss Birdseye's windows and greatly minded to re-enter the house, now he might speak to the girl. But he contented himself with the memory of her smile, and turned away with a sense of relief, after all, at having got out of such wild company, as well as with (in a different order) a vulgar consciousness of being very thirsty.

10

Verena Tarrant came in the very next day from Cambridge to Charles Street; that quarter of Boston is in direct communication with the academic suburb. It hardly seemed direct to poor Verena, perhaps, who, in the crowded streetcar which deposited her finally at Miss Chancellor's door, had to stand up all the way, half suspended by a leathern strap from the glazed roof of the stifling vehicle, like some blooming cluster dangling in a hothouse. She was used, however, to these perpendicular journeys, and though, as we have seen, she was not inclined to accept without question the social arrangements of her time, it never would have occurred to her to criticize the railways of her native land. The promptness of her visit to Olive Chancellor had been an idea of her mother's, and Verena listened open-eyed while this lady, in the seclusion of the little house in Cambridge, while Selah Tarrant was "off," as they said, with his patients, sketched out a line of conduct for her. The girl was both submissive and unworldly, and she listened to her mother's enumeration of the possible advantages of an intimacy with Miss Chancellor as she would have listened to any other fairy tale. It was still a part of the fairy tale when this zealous parent put on with her own hands Verena's smart hat and feather, buttoned her little jacket (the buttons were immense and gilt), and presented her with twenty cents to pay her carfare.

There was never any knowing in advance how Mrs. Tarrant would take a thing, and even Verena, who, filially, was much less argumentative than in her civic and, as it were, public capacity, had a perception that her mother was queer. She was queer, indeed—a flaccid, relaxed, unhealthy, whimsical woman, who still had a capacity to cling. What she clung to was "society," and a position in the world which a secret whisper told her she had never had and a voice more audible reminded her she was in danger of losing. To keep it, to recover it, to reconsecrate it, was the ambition of her heart; this was one of the many reasons why Providence had judged her worthy of having so wonderful a child. Verena was born not only to lead their common sex out of bondage, but to remodel a visiting-list which bulged and contracted in the wrong places, like a country-made garment. As the daughter of Abraham Greenstreet, Mrs. Tarrant had passed her youth in the first Abolitionist circles, and she was aware how much such a prospect was clouded by her union with a young man who had begun life as an itinerant vendor of lead pencils (he had called at Mr. Greenstreet's door in the exercise of this function), had afterwards been for a while a member of the celebrated Cayuga community, where there were no wives, or no husbands, or something of that sort (Mrs. Tarrant could never remember), and had still later (though before the development of the healing faculty) achieved distinction in the spiritualistic world. (He was an extraordinarily favored medium, only he had had to stop for reasons of which Mrs. Tarrant possessed her version.) Even in a society much occupied with the effacement of prejudice there had been certain dim presumptions against this versatile being, who naturally had not wanted arts to ingratiate himself with Miss Greenstreet, her eyes, like his own, being fixed exclusively on the future. The young couple (he was considerably her elder) had gazed on the future together until they found that the past had completely forsaken them and that the present offered but a slender foothold. Mrs. Tarrant, in other words, incurred the displeasure of her family, who gave her husband to understand that, much as they desired to remove the shackles from the slave, there were kinds of behavior which struck them as too unfettered. These had prevailed, to their thinking, at Cayuga, and they naturally felt it was no use for him to say that his residence there had been (for him—the community still existed) but a momentary episode, inasmuch as there was little more to be urged for the spiritual picnics and vegetarian camp meetings in which the discountenanced pair now sought consolation.

Such were the narrow views of people hitherto supposed capable of opening their hearts to all salutary novelties, but now put to a genuine test, as Mrs. Tarrant felt. Her husband's tastes rubbed off on her soft, moist moral surface, and the couple lived in an atmosphere of novelty, in which, occasionally, the accommodating wife encountered the fresh sensation of being in want of her dinner. Her father died, leaving, after all, very little money; he had spent his modest fortune upon the blacks. Selah Tarrant and his companion had strange adventures; she found herself completely enrolled in the great irregular army of nostrum-mongers, domiciled in humanitary Bohemia. It absorbed her like a social swamp; she sank into it a little more every day, without measuring the inches of her descent. Now she stood there up to her chin; it may probably be said of her that she had touched bottom. When she went to Miss Birdseye's it seemed to her that she re-entered society. The door that admitted her was not the door that admitted some of the others (she should never forget the tipped-up nose of Mrs. Farrinder), and the superior portal remained ajar, disclosing possible vistas. She had lived with long-haired men and short-haired women, she had contributed a flexible faith and an irremediable want of funds to a dozen social experiments, she had partaken of the comfort of a hundred religions, had followed innumerable dietary reforms, chiefly of the

negative order, and had gone of an evening to a *séance* or a lecture as regularly as she had eaten her supper. Her husband always had tickets for lectures; in moments of irritation at the want of a certain sequence in their career, she had remarked to him that it was the only thing he did have. The memory of all the winter nights they had tramped through the slush (the tickets, alas! were not car-tickets) to hear Mrs. Ada T. P. Foat discourse on the "Summer-land," came back to her with bitterness. Selah was quite enthusiastic at one time about Mrs. Foat, and it was his wife's belief that he had been "associated" with her (that was Selah's expression in referring to such episodes) at Cayuga. The poor woman, matrimonially, had a great deal to put up with; it took, at moments, all her belief in his genius to sustain her. She knew that he was very magnetic (that, in fact, was his genius), and she felt that it was his magnetism that held her to him. He had carried her through things where she really didn't know what to think; there were moments when she suspected that she had lost the strong moral sense for which the Greenstreets were always so celebrated.

Of course a woman who had had the bad taste to marry Selah Tarrant would not have been likely under any circumstances to possess a very straight judgment; but there is no doubt that this poor lady had grown dreadfully limp. She had blinked and compromised and shuffled; she asked herself whether, after all, it was any more than natural that she should have wanted to help her husband, in those exciting days of his mediumship, when the table, sometimes, wouldn't rise from the ground, the sofa wouldn't float through the air, and the soft hand of a lost loved one was not so alert as it might have been to visit the circle. Mrs. Tarrant's hand was soft enough for the most supernatural effect, and she consoled her conscience on such occasions by reflecting that she ministered to a belief in immortality. She was glad, somehow, for Verena's sake, that they had emerged from the phase of spirit-intercourse; her ambition for her daughter took another form than desiring that she, too, should minister to a belief in immortality. Yet among Mrs. Tarrant's multifarious memories these reminiscences of the darkened room, the waiting circle, the little taps on table and wall, the little touches on cheek and foot, the music in the air, the rain of flowers, the sense of something mysteriously flitting, were most tenderly cherished. She hated her husband for having magnetized her so that she consented to certain things, and even did them, the thought of which today would suddenly make her face burn; hated him for the manner in which, somehow, as she felt, he had lowered her social tone; yet at the same time she admired him for an impudence so consummate that it had ended (in the face of mortifications, exposures, failures, all the misery of a hand-to-mouth existence) by imposing itself on her as a kind of infallibility. She knew he was an awful humbug, and yet her knowledge had this imperfection, that he had never confessed it—a fact that was really grand when one thought of his opportunities for doing so. He had never allowed that he wasn't straight; the pair had so often been in the position of the two augurs behind the altar, and yet he had never given her a glance that the whole circle mightn't have observed. Even in the privacy of domestic intercourse he had phrases, excuses, explanations, ways of putting things, which, as she felt, were too sublime for just herself; they were pitched, as Selah's nature was pitched, altogether in the key of public life.

So it had come to pass, in her distended and demoralized conscience, that with all the things she despised in her life and all the things she rather liked, between being worn out with her husband's inability to earn a living and a kind of terror of his consistency (he had a theory that they lived delightfully), it happened, I say, that the only very definite criticism she made of him today was that he didn't know how to speak. That was where the shoe pinched—that was where Selah was slim. He couldn't hold the attention of an audience, he was not acceptable as a lecturer. He had plenty of thoughts, but it seemed as if he couldn't fit them into each other. Public speaking had been a Greenstreet tradition, and if Mrs. Tarrant had been asked whether in her younger years she had ever supposed she should marry a mesmeric healer, she would have replied: "Well, I never thought I should marry a gentleman who would be silent on the platform!" This was her most general humiliation; it included and exceeded every other, and it was a poor consolation that Selah possessed as a substitute—his career as a healer, to speak of none other, was there to prove it—the eloquence of the hand. The Greenstreets had never set much store on manual activity; they believed in the influence of the lips. It may be imagined, therefore, with what exultation, as time went on, Mrs. Tarrant found herself the mother of an inspired maiden, a young lady from whose lips eloquence flowed in streams. The Greenstreet tradition would not perish, and the dry places of her life would, perhaps, be plentifully watered. It must be added that, of late, this sandy surface had been irrigated, in moderation, from another source. Since Selah had addicted himself to the mesmeric mystery, their home had been a little more what the home of a Greenstreet should be. He had "considerable many" patients, he got about two dollars a sitting, and he had effected some most gratifying cures. A lady in Cambridge had been so much indebted to him that she had recently persuaded them to take a house near her, in order that Doctor Tarrant might drop in at any time. He availed himself of this convenience—they had taken so many houses that another, more or less, didn't matter—and Mrs. Tarrant began to feel as if they really had "struck" something.

Even to Verena, as we know, she was confused and confusing; the girl had not yet had an opportunity to ascertain the principles on which her mother's limpness was liable suddenly to become rigid. This phenomenon occurred when the vapors of social ambition mounted to her brain, when she extended an

arm from which a crumpled dressing gown fluttered back to seize the passing occasion. Then she surprised her daughter by a volubility of exhortation as to the duty of making acquaintances, and by the apparent wealth of her knowledge of the mysteries of good society. She had, in particular, a way of explaining confidentially—and in her desire to be graphic she often made up the oddest faces—the interpretation that you must sometimes give to the manners of the best people, and the delicate dignity with which you should meet them, which made Verena wonder what secret sources of information she possessed. Verena took life, as yet, very simply; she was not conscious of so many differences of social complexion. She knew that some people were rich and others poor, and that her father's house had never been visited by such abundance as might make one ask one's self whether it were right, in a world so full of the disinherited, to roll in luxury. But except when her mother made her slightly dizzy by a resentment of some slight that she herself had never perceived, or a flutter over some opportunity that appeared already to have passed (while Mrs. Tarrant was looking for something to "put on"), Verena had no vivid sense that she was not as good as any one else, for no authority appealing really to her imagination had fixed the place of mesmeric healers in the scale of fashion. It was impossible to know in advance how Mrs. Tarrant would take things. Sometimes she was abjectly indifferent; at others she thought that every one who looked at her wished to insult her. At moments she was full of suspicion of the ladies (they were mainly ladies) whom Selah mesmerized; then again she appeared to have given up everything but her slippers and the evening paper (from this publication she derived inscrutable solace), so that if Mrs. Foat in person had returned from the summer-land (to which she had some time since taken her flight), she would not have disturbed Mrs. Tarrant's almost cynical equanimity.

It was, however, in her social subtleties that she was most beyond her daughter; it was when she discovered extraordinary though latent longings on the part of people they met to make their acquaintance, that the girl became conscious of how much she herself had still to learn. All her desire was to learn, and it must be added that she regarded her mother, in perfect good faith, as a wonderful teacher. She was perplexed sometimes by her worldliness; that, somehow, was not a part of the higher life which every one in such a house as theirs must wish above all things to lead; and it was not involved in the reign of justice, which they were all trying to bring about, that such a strict account should be kept of every little snub. Her father seemed to Verena to move more consecutively on the high plane; though his indifference to old-fashioned standards, his perpetual invocation of the brighter day, had not yet led her to ask herself whether, after all, men are more disinterested than women. Was it interest that prompted her mother to respond so warmly to Miss Chancellor, to say to Verena, with an air of knowingness, that the thing to do was to go in and see her *immediately?* No italics can represent the earnestness of Mrs. Tarrant's emphasis. Why hadn't she said, as she had done in former cases, that if people wanted to see them they could come out to their home; that she was not so low down in the world as not to know there was such a ceremony as leaving cards? When Mrs. Tarrant began on the question of ceremonies she was apt to go far; but she had waived it in this case; it suited her more to hold that Miss Chancellor had been very gracious, that she was a most desirable friend, that she had been more affected than any one by Verena's beautiful outpouring; that she would open to her the best salons in Boston; that when she said "Come soon" she meant the very next day, that this was the way to take it, anyhow (one must know when to go forward gracefully) ; and that in short she, Mrs. Tarrant, knew what she was talking about.

Verena accepted all this, for she was young enough to enjoy any journey in a horsecar, and she was ever-curious about the world; she only wondered a little how her mother knew so much about Miss Chancellor just from looking at her once. What Verena had mainly observed in the young lady who came up to her that way the night before was that she was rather dolefully dressed, that she looked as if she had been crying (Verena recognized that look quickly, she had seen it so much), and that she was in a hurry to get away. However, if she was as remarkable as her mother said, one would very soon see it; and meanwhile there was nothing in the girl's feeling about herself, in her sense of her importance, to make it a painful effort for her to run the risk of a mistake. She had no particular feeling about herself; she only cared, as yet, for outside things. Even the development of her "gift" had not made her think herself too precious for mere experiments; she had neither a particle of diffidence nor a particle of vanity. Though it would have seemed to you eminently natural that a daughter of Selah Tarrant and his wife should be an inspirational speaker, yet, as you knew Verena better, you would have wondered immensely how she came to issue from such a pair. Her ideas of enjoyment were very simple; she enjoyed putting on her new hat, with its redundancy of feather, and twenty cents appeared to her a very large sum.

11

"I was certain you would come—I have felt it all day—something told me!" It was with these words that Olive Chancellor greeted her young visitor, coming to her quickly from the window, where she might have been waiting for her arrival. Some weeks later she explained to Verena how definite this prevision had been, how it had filled her all day with a nervous agitation so violent as to be painful. She told her that such forebodings were a peculiarity of her organization, that she didn't know what to make of them, that she had to accept them; and she mentioned, as another example, the sudden dread that had come to her the evening before in the carriage, after proposing to Mr. Ransom to go with her to Miss Birdseye's. This had been as strange as it had been instinctive, and the strangeness, of course, was what must have struck Mr. Ransom; for the idea that he might come had been hers, and yet she suddenly veered round. She couldn't help it; her heart had begun to throb with the conviction that if he crossed that threshold some harm would come of it for her. She hadn't prevented him, and now she didn't care, for now, as she intimated, she had the interest of Verena, and that made her indifferent to every danger, to every ordinary pleasure. By this time Verena had learned how peculiarly her friend was constituted, how nervous and serious she was, how personal, how exclusive, what a force of will she had, what a concentration of purpose. Olive had taken her up, in the literal sense of the phrase, like a bird of the air, had spread an extraordinary pair of wings, and carried her through the dizzying void of space. Verena liked it, for the most part; liked to shoot upward without an effort of her own and look down upon all creation, upon all history, from such a height. From this first interview she felt that she was seized, and she gave herself up, only shutting her eyes a little, as we do whenever a person in whom we have perfect confidence proposes, with our assent, to subject us to some sensation.

"I want to know you," Olive said, on this occasion; "I felt that I must last night, as soon as I heard you speak. You seem to me very wonderful. I don't know what to make of you. I think we ought to be friends; so I just asked you to come to me straight off, without preliminaries, and I believed you would come. It is so *right* that you have come, and it proves how right I was." These remarks fell from Miss Chancellor's lips one by one, as she caught her breath, with the tremor that was always in her voice, even when she was the least excited, while she made Verena sit down near her on the sofa, and looked at her all over in a manner that caused the girl to rejoice at having put on the jacket with the gilt buttons. It was this glance that was the beginning; it was with this quick survey, omitting nothing, that Olive took possession of her. "You are very remarkable; I wonder if you know how remarkable!" she went on, murmuring the words as if she were losing herself, becoming inadvertent in admiration.

Verena sat there smiling, without a blush, but with a pure, bright look which, for her, would always make protests unnecessary. "Oh, it isn't me, you know; it's something outside!" She tossed this off lightly, as if she were in the habit of saying it, and Olive wondered whether it were a sincere disclaimer or only a phrase of the lips. The question was not a criticism, for she might have been satisfied that the girl was a mass of fluent catchwords and yet scarcely have liked her the less. It was just as she was that she liked her; she was so strange, so different from the girls one usually met, seemed to belong to some queer gypsy-land or transcendental Bohemia. With her bright, vulgar clothes, her salient appearance, she might have been a ropedancer or a fortuneteller; and this had the immense merit, for Olive, that it appeared to make her belong to the "people," threw her into the social dusk of that mysterious democracy which Miss Chancellor held that the fortunate classes know so little about, and with which (in a future possibly very near) they will have to count. Moreover, the girl had moved her as she had never been moved, and the power to do that, from whatever source it came, was a force that one must admire. Her emotion was still acute, however much she might speak to her visitor as if everything that had happened seemed to her natural; and what kept it, above all, from subsiding was her sense that she found here what she had been looking for so long—a friend of her own sex with whom she might have a union of soul. It took a double consent to make a friendship, but it was not possible that this intensely sympathetic girl would refuse. Olive had the penetration to discover in a moment that she was a creature of unlimited generosity. I know not what may have been the reality of Miss Chancellor's other premonitions, but there is no doubt that in this respect she took Verena's measure on the spot. This was what she wanted; after that the rest didn't matter; Miss Tarrant might wear gilt buttons from head to foot, her soul could not be vulgar.

"Mother told me I had better come right in," said Verena, looking now about the room, very glad to find herself in so pleasant a place, and noticing a great many things that she should like to see in detail.

"Your mother saw that I meant what I said; it isn't everybody that does me the honor to perceive that. She saw that I was shaken from head to foot. I could only say three words —I couldn't have spoken more!

What a power—what a power, Miss Tarrant!"

"Yes, I suppose it is a power. If it wasn't a power, it couldn't do much with me!"

"You are so simple—so much like a child," Olive Chancellor said. That was the truth, and she wanted to say it because, quickly, without forms or circumlocutions, it made them familiar. She wished to arrive at this; her impatience was such that before the girl had been five minutes in the room she jumped to her point—inquired of her, interrupting herself, interrupting everything: "Will you be my friend, my friend of friends, beyond every one, everything, forever and forever?" Her face was full of eagerness and tenderness.

Verena gave a laugh of clear amusement, without a shade of embarrassment or confusion. "Perhaps you like me too much."

"Of course I like you too much! When I like, I like too much. But of course it's another thing, your liking me," Olive Chancellor added. "We must wait—we must wait. When I care for anything, I can be patient." She put out her hand to Verena, and the movement was at once so appealing and so confident that the girl instinctively placed her own in it. So, hand in hand, for some moments, these two young women sat looking at each other. "There is so much I want to ask you," said Olive.

"Well, I can't say much except when father has worked on me," Verena answered, with an ingenuousness beside which humility would have seemed pretentious.

"I don't care anything about your father," Olive Chancellor rejoined very gravely, with a great air of security.

"He is very good," Verena said simply. "And he's wonderfully magnetic."

"It isn't your father, and it isn't your mother; I don't think of them, and it's not them I want. It's only you—just as you are."

Verena dropped her eyes over the front of her dress. "Just as she was" seemed to her indeed very well.

"Do you want me to give up——?" she demanded, smiling.

Olive Chancellor drew in her breath for an instant, like a creature in pain; then, with her quavering voice, touched with a vibration of anguish, she said: "Oh, how can I ask you to give up? *I* will give up—I will give up everything!"

Filled with the impression of her hostess's agreeable interior, and of what her mother had told her about Miss Chancellor's wealth, her position in Boston society, Verena, in her fresh, diverted scrutiny of the surrounding objects, wondered what could be the need of this scheme of renunciation. Oh no, indeed, she hoped she wouldn't give up—at least not before she, Verena, had had a chance to see. She felt, however, that for the present there would be no answer for her save in the mere pressure of Miss Chancellor's eager nature, that intensity of emotion which made her suddenly exclaim, as if in a nervous ecstasy of anticipation, "But we must wait! Why do we talk of this? We must wait! All will be right," she added more calmly, with great sweetness.

Verena wondered afterward why she had not been more afraid of her—why, indeed, she had not turned and saved herself by darting out of the room. But it was not in this young woman's nature to be either timid or cautious; she had as yet to make acquaintance with the sentiment of fear. She knew too little of the world to have learned to mistrust sudden enthusiasms, and if she had had a suspicion it would have been (in accordance with common worldly knowledge) the wrong one—the suspicion that such a whimsical liking would burn itself out. She could not have that one, for there was a light in Miss Chancellor's magnified face which seemed to say that a sentiment, with her, might consume its object, might consume Miss Chancellor, but would never consume itself. Verena, as yet, had no sense of being scorched; she was only agreeably warmed. She also had dreamed of a friendship, though it was not what she had dreamed of most, and it came over her that this was the one which fortune might have been keeping. She never held back.

"Do you live here all alone?" she asked of Olive.

"I shouldn't if you would come and live with me!"

Even this really passionate rejoinder failed to make Verena shrink; she thought it so possible that in the wealthy class people made each other such easy proposals. It was a part of the romance, the luxury, of wealth; it belonged to the world of invitations, in which she had had so little share. But it seemed almost a mockery when she thought of the little house in Cambridge, where the boards were loose in the steps of the porch.

"I must stay with my father and mother," she said. "And then I have my work, you know. That's the way I must live now."

"Your work?" Olive repeated, not quite understanding.

"My gift," said Verena, smiling.

"Oh yes, you must use it. That's what I mean; you must move the world with it; it's divine."

It was so much what she meant that she had lain awake all night thinking of it, and the substance of her thought was that if she could only rescue the girl from the danger of vulgar exploitation, could only constitute herself her protectress and devotee, the two, between them, might achieve the great result. Verena's genius was a mystery, and it might remain a mystery; it was impossible to see how this charming, blooming, simple creature, all youth and grace and innocence, got her extraordinary powers of reflection.

When her gift was not in exercise she appeared anything but reflective, and as she sat there now, for instance, you would never have dreamed that she had had a vivid revelation. Olive had to content herself, provisionally, with saying that her precious faculty had come to her just as her beauty and distinction (to Olive she was full of that quality) had come; it had dropped straight from heaven, without filtering through her parents, whom Miss Chancellor decidedly did not fancy. Even among reformers she discriminated; she thought all wise people wanted great changes, but the votaries of change were not necessarily wise. She remained silent a little, after her last remark, and then she repeated again, as if it were the solution of everything, as if it represented with absolute certainty some immense happiness in the future—"We must wait, we must wait!" Verena was perfectly willing to wait, though she did not exactly know what they were to wait for, and the aspiring frankness of her assent shone out of her face, and seemed to pacify their mutual gaze. Olive asked her innumerable questions; she wanted to enter into her life. It was one of those talks which people remember afterwards, in which every word has been given and taken, and in which they see the signs of a beginning that was to be justified. The more Olive learnt of her visitor's life the more she wanted to enter into it, the more it took her out of herself. Such strange lives are led in America, she always knew that; but this was queerer than anything she had dreamed of, and the queerest part was that the girl herself didn't appear to think it queer. She had been nursed in darkened rooms, and suckled in the midst of manifestations; she had begun to "attend lectures," as she said, when she was quite an infant, because her mother had no one to leave her with at home. She had sat on the knees of somnambulists, and had been passed from hand to hand by trance-speakers; she was familiar with every kind of "cure," and had grown up among lady-editors of newspapers advocating new religions, and people who disapproved of the marriage-tie. Verena talked of the marriage-tie as she would have talked of the last novel—as if she had heard it as frequently discussed; and at certain times, listening to the answers she made to her questions, Olive Chancellor closed her eyes in the manner of a person waiting till giddiness passed. Her young friend's revelations actually gave her a vertigo; they made her perceive everything from which she should have rescued her. Verena was perfectly uncontaminated, and she would never be touched by evil; but though Olive had no views about the marriage-tie except that she should hate it for herself—that particular reform she did not propose to consider—she didn't like the "atmosphere" of circles in which such institutions were called into question. She had no wish now to enter into an examination of that particular one; nevertheless, to make sure, she would just ask Verena whether she disapproved of it.

"Well, I must say," said Miss Tarrant, "I prefer free unions."

Olive held her breath an instant; such an idea was so disagreeable to her. Then, for all answer, she murmured, irresolutely, "I wish you would let me help you!" Yet it seemed, at the same time, that Verena needed little help, for it was more and more clear that her eloquence, when she stood up that way before a roomful of people, was literally inspiration. She answered all her friend's questions with a good-nature which evidently took no pains to make things plausible, an effort to oblige, not to please; but, after all, she could give very little account of herself. This was very visible when Olive asked her where she had got her "intense realization" of the suffering of women; for her address at Miss Birdseye's showed that she, too (like Olive herself), had had that vision in the watches of the night. Verena thought a moment, as if to understand what her companion referred to, and then she inquired, always smiling, where Joan of Arc had got her idea of the suffering of France. This was so prettily said that Olive could scarcely keep from kissing her; she looked at the moment as if, like Joan, she might have had visits from the saints. Olive, of course, remembered afterwards that it had not literally answered the question; and she also reflected on something that made an answer seem more difficult—the fact that the girl had grown up among lady-doctors, lady-mediums, lady-editors, ladypreachers, lady-healers, women who, having rescued themselves from a passive existence, could illustrate only partially the misery of the sex at large. It was true that they might have illustrated it by their talk, by all they had "been through" and all they could tell a younger sister; but Olive was sure that Verena's prophetic impulse had not been stirred by the chatter of women (Miss Chancellor knew that sound as well as any one) ; it had proceeded rather out of their silence. She said to her visitor that whether or not the angels came down to her in glittering armor, she struck her as the only person she had yet encountered who had exactly the same tenderness, the same pity, for women that she herself had. Miss Birdseye had something of it, but Miss Birdseye wanted passion, wanted keenness, was capable of the weakest concessions. Mrs. Farrinder was not weak, of course, and she brought a great intellect to the matter; but she was not personal enough—she was too abstract. Verena was not abstract; she seemed to have lived in imagination through all the ages. Verena said she *did* think she had a certain amount of imagination; she supposed she couldn't be so effective on the platform if she hadn't a rich fancy. Then Olive said to her, taking her hand again, that she wanted her to assure her of this—that it was the only thing in all the world she cared for, the redemption of women, the thing she hoped under Providence to give her life to. Verena flushed a little at this appeal, and the deeper glow of her eyes was the first sign of exaltation she had offered. "Oh yes—I want to give my life!" she exclaimed, with a vibrating voice; and then she added gravely, "I want to do something great!"

"You will, you will, we both will!" Olive Chancellor cried, in rapture. But after a little she went on: "I

wonder if you know what it means, young and lovely as you are—giving your life!"

Verena looked down for a moment in meditation.

"Well," she replied, "I guess I have thought more than I appear."

"Do you understand German? Do you know 'Faust'?" said Olive. " *'Entsagen sollst du, sollst entsagen!' "*

"I don't know German; I should like so to study it; I want to know everything."

"We will work at it together—we will study everything," Olive almost panted; and while she spoke the peaceful picture hung before her of still winter evenings under the lamp, with falling snow outside, and tea on a little table, and successful renderings, with a chosen companion, of Goethe, almost the only foreign author she cared about; for she hated the writing of the French, in spite of the importance they have given to women. Such a vision as this was the highest indulgence she could offer herself; she had it only at considerable intervals. It seemed as if Verena caught a glimpse of it too, for her face kindled still more, and she said she should like that ever so much. At the same time she asked the meaning of the German words.

" 'Thou shalt renounce, refrain, abstain!' That's the way Bayard Taylor has translated them," Olive answered.

"Oh, well, I guess I can abstain!" Verena exclaimed, with a laugh. And she got up rather quickly, as if by taking leave she might give a proof of what she meant. Olive put out her hands to hold her, and at this moment one of the *portières* of the room was pushed aside, while a gentleman was ushered in by Miss Chancellor's little parlormaid.

Verena recognized him; she had seen him the night before at Miss Birdseye's, and she said to her hostess, "Now I must go—you have got another caller!" It was Verena's belief that in the fashionable world (like Mrs. Farrinder, she thought Miss Chancellor belonged to it—thought that, in standing there, she herself was in it)—in the highest social walks it was the custom of a prior guest to depart when another friend arrived. She had been told at people's doors that she could not be received because the lady of the house had a visitor, and she had retired on these occasions with a feeling of awe much more than a sense of injury. They had not been the portals of fashion, but in this respect, she deemed, they had emulated such bulwarks. Olive Chancellor offered Basil Ransom a greeting which she believed to be consummately ladylike, and which the young man, narrating the scene several months later to Mrs. Luna, whose susceptibilities he did not feel himself obliged to consider (she considered his so little), described by saying that she glared at him. Olive had thought it very possible he would come that day if he was to leave Boston; though she was perfectly mindful that she had given him no encouragement at the moment they separated. If he should not come she should be annoyed, and if he should come she should be furious; she was also sufficiently mindful of that. But she had a foreboding that, of the two grievances, fortune would confer upon her only the less; the only one she had as yet was that he had responded to her letter—a complaint rather wanting in richness. If he came, at any rate, he would be likely to come shortly before dinner, at the same hour as yesterday. He had now anticipated this period considerably, and it seemed to Miss Chancellor that he had taken a base advantage of her, stolen a march upon her privacy. She was startled, disconcerted, but as I have said, she was rigorously ladylike. She was determined not again to be fantastic, as she had been about his coming to Miss Birdseye's. The strange dread associating itself with that was something which, she devoutly trusted, she had felt once for all. She didn't know what he could do to her; he hadn't prevented, on the spot though he was, one of the happiest things that had befallen her for so long—this quick, confident visit of Verena Tarrant. It was only just at the last that he had come in, and Verena must go now; Olive's detaining hand immediately relaxed itself.

It is to be feared there was no disguise of Ransom's satisfaction at finding himself once more face to face with the charming creature with whom he had exchanged that final speechless smile the evening before. He was more glad to see her than if she had been an old friend, for it seemed to him that she had suddenly become a new one. "The delightful girl," he said to himself; "she smiles at me as if she liked me!" He could not know that this was fatuous, that she smiled so at every one; the first time she saw people she treated them as if she recognized them. Moreover, she did not seat herself again in his honor; she let it be seen that she was still going. The three stood there together in the middle of the long, characteristic room, and, for the first time in her life, Olive Chancellor chose not to introduce two persons who met under her roof. She hated Europe, but she could be European if it were necessary. Neither of her companions had an idea that in leaving them simply planted face to face (the terror of the American heart) she had so high a warrant; and presently Basil Ransom felt that he didn't care whether he were introduced or not, for the greatness of an evil didn't matter if the remedy were equally great.

"Miss Tarrant won't be surprised if I recognize her—if I take the liberty to speak to her. She is a public character; she must pay the penalty of her distinction." These words he boldly addressed to the girl, with his most gallant Southern manner, saying to himself meanwhile that she was prettier still by daylight.

"Oh, a great many gentlemen have spoken to me," Verena said. "There were quite a number at Topeka —" And her phrase lost itself in her look at Olive, as if she were wondering what was the matter with her.

"Now, I am afraid you are going the very moment I appear," Ransom went on. "Do you know that's very cruel to me? I know what your ideas are—you expressed them last night in such beautiful language; of course you convinced me. I am ashamed of being a man; but I am, and I can't help it, and I'll do penance any way you may prescribe. *Must* she go, Miss Olive?" he asked of his cousin. "Do you flee before the individual male?" And he turned again to Verena.

This young lady gave a laugh that resembled speech in liquid fusion. "Oh no; I like the individual!"

As an incarnation of a "movement," Ransom thought her more and more singular, and he wondered how she came to be closeted so soon with his kinswoman, to whom, only a few hours before, she had been a complete stranger. These, however, were doubtless the normal proceedings of women. He begged her to sit down again; he was sure Miss Chancellor would be sorry to part with her. Verena, looking at her friend, not for permission, but for sympathy, dropped again into a chair, and Ransom waited to see Miss Chancellor do the same. She gratified him after a moment, because she could not refuse without appearing to put a hurt upon Verena; but it went hard with her, and she was altogether discomposed. She had never

seen any one so free in her own drawing room as this loud Southerner, to whom she had so rashly offered a footing; he extended invitations to her guests under her nose. That Verena should do as he asked her was a signal sign of the absence of that "home-culture" (it was so that Miss Chancellor expressed the missing quality) which she never supposed the girl possessed: fortunately, as it would be supplied to her in abundance in Charles Street. (Olive of course held that home-culture was perfectly compatible with the widest emancipation.) It was with a perfectly good conscience that Verena complied with Basil Ransom's request; but it took her quick sensibility only a moment to discover that her friend was not pleased. She scarcely knew what had ruffled her, but at the same instant there passed before her the vision of the anxieties (of this sudden, unexplained sort, for instance, and much worse) which intimate relations with Miss Chancellor might entail.

"Now, I want you to tell me this," Basil Ransom said, leaning forward towards Verena, with his hands on his knees, and completely oblivious to his hostess. "Do you really believe all that pretty moonshine you talked last night? I could have listened to you for another hour; but I never heard such monstrous sentiments. I must protest—I must, as a calumniated, misrepresented man. Confess you meant it as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*—a satire on Mrs. Farrinder?" He spoke in a tone of the freest pleasantry, with his familiar, friendly Southern cadence.

Verena looked at him with eyes that grew large. "Why, you don't mean to say you don't believe in our cause?"

"Oh, it won't do—it won't do!" Ransom went on, laughing. "You are on the wrong tack altogether. Do you really take the ground that your sex has been without influence? Influence? Why, you have led us all by the nose to where we are now! Wherever we are, it's all you. You are at the bottom of everything."

"Oh yes, and we want to be at the top," said Verena.

"Ah, the bottom is a better place, depend on it, when from there you move the whole mass! Besides, you are on the top as well; you are everywhere, you are everything. I am of the opinion of that historical character—wasn't he some king?—who thought there was a lady behind everything. Whatever it was, he held, you have only to look for her; she is the explanation. Well, I always look for her, and I always find her; of course, I am always delighted to do so; but it proves she is the universal cause. Now, you don't mean to deny that power, the power of setting men in motion. You are at the bottom of all the wars."

"Well, I am like Mrs. Farrinder; I like opposition," Verena exclaimed, with a happy smile.

"That proves, as I say, how in spite of your expressions of horror you delight in the shock of battle. What do you say to Helen of Troy and the fearful carnage she excited? It is well known that the Empress of France was at the bottom of the last war in that country. And as for our four fearful years of slaughter, of course you won't deny that there the ladies were the great motive power. The Abolitionists brought it on, and were not the Abolitionists principally females? Who was that celebrity that was mentioned last night?—Eliza P. Moseley. I regard Eliza as the cause of the biggest war of which history preserves the record."

Basil Ransom enjoyed his humor the more because Verena appeared to enjoy it; and the look with which she replied to him, at the end of this little tirade, "Why, sir, you ought to take the platform too; we might go round together as poison and antidote!"—this made him feel that he had convinced her, for the moment, quite as much as it was important he should. In Verena's face, however, it lasted but an instant—an instant after she had glanced at Olive Chancellor, who, with her eyes fixed intently on the ground (a look she was to learn to know so well), had a strange expression. The girl slowly got up; she felt that she must go. She guessed Miss Chancellor didn't like this handsome joker (it was so that Basil Ransom struck her); and it was impressed upon her ("in time," as she thought) that her new friend would be more serious even than she about the woman-question, serious as she had hitherto believed herself to be.

"I should like so much to have the pleasure of seeing you again," Ransom continued. "I think I should be able to interpret history for you by a new light."

"Well, I should be very happy to see you in my home." These words had barely fallen from Verena's lips (her mother told her they were, in general, the proper thing to say when people expressed such a desire as that; she must not let it be assumed that she would come first to them)—she had hardly uttered this hospitable speech when she felt the hand of her hostess upon her arm and became aware that a passionate appeal sat in Olive's eyes.

"You will just catch the Charles Street car," that young woman murmured, with muffled sweetness.

Verena did not understand further than to see that she ought already to have departed; and the simplest response was to kiss Miss Chancellor, an act which she briefly performed. Basil Ransom understood still less, and it was a melancholy commentary on his contention that men are not inferior, that this meeting could not come, however rapidly, to a close without his plunging into a blunder which necessarily aggravated those he had already made. He had been invited by the little prophetess, and yet he had not been invited; but he did not take that up, because he must absolutely leave Boston on the morrow, and, besides, Miss Chancellor appeared to have something to say to it. But he put out his hand to Verena and said, "Good-by, Miss Tarrant; are we not to have the pleasure of hearing you in New York? I am afraid we are sadly sunk."

"Certainly, I should like to raise my voice in the biggest city," the girl replied.

"Well, try to come on. I won't refute you. It would be a very stupid world, after all, if we always knew what women were going to say."

Verena was conscious of the approach of the Charles Street car, as well as of the fact that Miss Chancellor was in pain; but she lingered long enough to remark that she could see he had the old-fashioned idea—he regarded woman as the toy of man.

"Don't say the toy—say the joy!" Ransom exclaimed. "There is one statement I will venture to advance; I am quite as fond of you as you are of each other!"

"Much he knows about that!" said Verena, with a sidelong smile at Olive Chancellor.

For Olive, it made her more beautiful than ever; still, there was no trace of this mere personal elation in the splendid sententiousness with which, turning to Mr. Ransom, she remarked: "What women may be, or may not be, to each other, I won't attempt just now to say; but what *the truth* may be to a human soul, I think perhaps even a woman may faintly suspect!"

"The truth? My dear cousin, your truth is a most vain thing!"

"Gracious me!" cried Verena Tarrant; and the gay vibration of her voice as she uttered this simple ejaculation was the last that Ransom heard of her. Miss Chancellor swept her out of the room, leaving the young man to extract a relish from the ineffable irony with which she uttered the words "even a woman." It was to be supposed, on general grounds, that she would reappear, but there was nothing in the glance she gave him, as she turned her back, that was an earnest of this. He stood there a moment, wondering; then his wonder spent itself on the page of a book which, according to his habit at such times, he had mechanically taken up, and in which he speedily became interested. He read it for five minutes in an uncomfortable-looking attitude, and quite forgot that he had been forsaken. He was recalled to this fact by the entrance of Mrs. Luna, arrayed as if for the street, and putting on her gloves again—she seemed always to be putting on her gloves. She wanted to know what in the world he was doing there alone—whether her sister had not been notified.

"Oh yes," said Ransom, "she has just been with me, but she has gone downstairs with Miss Tarrant."

"And who in the world is Miss Tarrant?"

Ransom was surprised that Mrs. Luna should not know of the intimacy of the two young ladies, in spite of the brevity of their acquaintance, being already so great. But, apparently, Miss Olive had not mentioned her new friend. "Well, she is an inspirational speaker—the most charming creature in the world!"

Mrs. Luna paused in her manipulations, gave an amazed, amused stare, then caused the room to ring with her laughter. "You don't mean to say you are converted—already?"

"Converted to Miss Tarrant, decidedly."

"You are not to belong to any Miss Tarrant; you are to belong to me," Mrs. Luna said, having thought over her Southern kinsman during the twenty-four hours, and made up her mind that he would be a good man for a lone woman to know. Then she added: "Did you come here to meet her —the inspirational speaker?"

"No; I came to bid your sister good-by."

"Are you really going? I haven't made you promise half the things I want yet. But we will settle that in New York. How do you get on with Olive Chancellor?" Mrs. Luna continued, making her points, as she always did, with eagerness, though her roundness and her dimples had hitherto prevented her from being accused of that vice. It was her practice to speak of her sister by her whole name, and you would have supposed, from her usual manner of alluding to her, that Olive was much the older, instead of having been born ten years later than Adeline. She had as many ways as possible of marking the gulf that divided them; but she bridged it over lightly now by saying to Basil Ransom: "Isn't she a dear old thing?"

This bridge, he saw, would not bear his weight, and her question seemed to him to have more audacity than sense. Why should she be so insincere? She might know that a man couldn't recognize Miss Chancellor in such a description as that. She was not old—she was sharply young; and it was inconceivable to him, though he had just seen the little prophetess kiss her, that she should ever become any one's "dear." Least of all was she a "thing"; she was intensely, fearfully, a person. He hesitated a moment, and then he replied: "She's a very remarkable woman."

"Take care—don't be reckless!" cried Mrs. Luna. "Do you think she is very dreadful?"

"Don't say anything against my cousin," Basil answered; and at that moment Miss Chancellor re-entered the room. She murmured some request that he would excuse her absence, but her sister interrupted her with an inquiry about Miss Tarrant.

"Mr. Ransom thinks her wonderfully charming. Why didn't you show her to me? Do you want to keep her all to yourself?"

Olive rested her eyes for some moments upon Mrs. Luna, without speaking. Then she said: "Your veil is not put on straight, Adeline."

"I look like a monster—that, evidently, is what you mean!" Adeline exclaimed, going to the mirror to rearrange the peccant tissue.

Miss Chancellor did not again ask Ransom to be seated; she appeared to take it for granted that he

would leave her now. But instead of this he returned to the subject of Verena; he asked her whether she supposed the girl would come out in public—would go about like Mrs. Farrinder?

"Come out in public!" Olive repeated; "in public? Why, you don't imagine that pure voice is to be hushed?"

"Oh, hushed, no! it's too sweet for that. But not raised to a scream; not forced and cracked and ruined. She oughtn't to become like the others. She ought to remain apart."

"Apart—*apart?"* said Miss Chancellor; "when we shall all be looking to her, gathering about her, praying for her!" There was an exceeding scorn in her voice. "If *I* can help her, she shall be an immense power for good."

"An immense power for quackery, my dear Miss Olive!" This broke from Basil Ransom's lips in spite of a vow he had just taken not to say anything that should "aggravate" his hostess, who was in a state of tension it was not difficult to detect. But he had lowered his tone to friendly pleading, and the offensive word was mitigated by his smile.

She moved away from him, backwards, as if he had given her a push. "Ah, well, now you are reckless," Mrs. Luna remarked, drawing out her ribbons before the mirror.

"I don't think you would interfere if you knew how little you understand us," Miss Chancellor said to Ransom.

"Whom do you mean by 'us'—your whole delightful sex? I don't understand *you,* Miss Olive."

"Come away with me, and I'll explain her as we go," Mrs. Luna went on, having finished her toilet.

Ransom offered his hand in farewell to his hostess; but Olive found it impossible to do anything but ignore the gesture. She could not have let him touch her. "Well, then, if you must exhibit her to the multitude, bring her on to New York," he said, with the same attempt at a light treatment.

"You'll have *me* in New York—you don't want any one else!" Mrs. Luna ejaculated, coquettishly. "I have made up my mind to winter there now."

Olive Chancellor looked from one to the other of her two relatives, one near and the other distant, but each so little in sympathy with her, and it came over her that there might be a kind of protection for her in binding them together, entangling them with each other. She had never had an idea of that kind in her life before, and that this sudden subtlety should have gleamed upon her as a momentary talisman gives the measure of her present nervousness.

"If I could take her to New York, I would take her farther," she remarked, hoping she was enigmatical.

"You talk about 'taking her,' as if you were a lecture-agent. Are you going into that business?" Mrs. Luna asked.

Ransom could not help noticing that Miss Chancellor would not shake hands with him, and he felt, on the whole, rather injured. He paused a moment before leaving the room—standing there with his hand on the knob of the door. "Look here, Miss Oilve, what did you write to me to come and see you for?" He made this inquiry with a countenance not destitute of gaiety, but his eyes showed something of that yellow light—just momentarily lurid—of which mention has been made. Mrs. Luna was on her way downstairs, and her companions remained face to face.

"Ask my sister—I think she will tell you," said Olive, turning away from him and going to the window. She remained there, looking out; she heard the door of the house close, and saw the two cross the street together. As they passed out of sight her fingers played, softly, a little air upon the pane; it seemed to her that she had had an inspiration.

Basil Ransom, meanwhile, put the question to Mrs. Luna. "If she was not going to like me, why in the world did she write to me?"

"Because she wanted you to know me—she thought *I* would like you!" And apparently she had not been wrong; for Mrs. Luna, when they reached Beacon Street, would not hear of his leaving her to go her way alone, would not in the least admit his plea that he had only an hour or two more in Boston (he was to travel, economically, by the boat) and must devote the time to his business. She appealed to his Southern chivalry, and not in vain; practically, at least, he admitted the rights of women.

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Mrs. Tarrant was delighted, as may be imagined, with her daughter's account of Miss Chancellor's interior, and the reception the girl had found there; and Verena, for the next month, took her way very often to Charles Street. "Just you be as nice to her as you know how," Mrs. Tarrant had said to her; and she reflected with some complacency that her daughter did know—she knew how to do everything of that sort. It was not that Verena had been taught; that branch of the education of young ladies which is known as "manners and deportment" had not figured, as a definite head, in Miss Tarrant's curriculum. She had been told, indeed, that she must not lie nor steal; but she had been told very little else about behavior; her only great advantage, in short, had been the parental example. But her mother liked to think that she was quick and graceful, and she questioned her exhaustively as to the progress of this interesting episode; she didn't see why, as she said, it shouldn't be a permanent "stand-by" for Verena. In Mrs. Tarrant's meditations upon the girl's future she had never thought of a fine marriage as a reward of effort; she would have deemed herself very immoral if she had endeavored to capture for her child a rich husband. She had not, in fact, a very vivid sense of the existence of such agents of fate; all the rich men she had seen already had wives, and the unmarried men, who were generally very young, were distinguished from each other not so much by the figure of their income, which came little into question, as by the degree of their interest in regenerating ideas. She supposed Verena would marry someone, some day, and she hoped the personage would be connected with public life—which meant, for Mrs. Tarrant, that his name would be visible, in the lamplight, on a colored poster, in the doorway of Tremont Temple. But she was not eager about this vision, for the implications of matrimony were for the most part wanting in brightness—consisted of a tired woman holding a baby over a furnace-register that emitted lukewarm air. A real lovely friendship with a young woman who had, as Mrs. Tarrant expressed it, "prop'ty," would occupy agreeably such an interval as might occur before Verena should meet her sterner fate; it would be a great thing for her to have a place to run into when she wanted a change, and there was no knowing but what it might end in her having two homes. For the idea of the home, like most American women of her quality, Mrs. Tarrant had an extreme reverence; and it was her candid faith that in all the vicissitudes of the past twenty years she had preserved the spirit of this institution. If it should exist in duplicate for Verena, the girl would be favored indeed.

All this was as nothing, however, compared with the fact that Miss Chancellor seemed to think her young friend's gift *was* inspirational, or at any rate, as Selah had so often said, quite unique. She couldn't make out very exactly, by Verena, what she thought; but if the way Miss Chancellor had taken hold of her didn't show that she believed she could rouse the people, Mrs. Tarrant didn't know what it showed. It was a satisfaction to her that Verena evidently responded freely; she didn't think anything of what she spent in car-tickets, and indeed she had told her that Miss Chancellor wanted to stuff her pockets with them. At first she went in because her mother liked to have her; but now, evidently, she went because she was so much drawn. She expressed the highest admiration of her new friend; she said it took her a little while to see into her, but now that she did, well, she was perfectly splendid. When Verena wanted to admire she went ahead of everyone, and it was delightful to see how she was stimulated by the young lady in Charles Street. They thought everything of each other—that was very plain; you could scarcely tell which thought most. Each thought the other so noble, and Mrs. Tarrant had a faith that between them they *would* rouse the people. What Verena wanted was someone who would know how to handle her (her father hadn't handled anything except the healing, up to this time, with real success), and perhaps Miss Chancellor would take hold better than some that made more of a profession.

"It's beautiful, the way she draws you out," Verena had said to her mother; "there's something so searching that the first time I visited her it quite realized my idea of the Day of Judgment. But she seems to show all that's in herself at the same time, and then you see how lovely it is. She's just as pure as she can live; you see if she is not, when you know her. She's so noble herself that she makes you feel as if you wouldn't want to be less so. She doesn't care for anything but the elevation of our sex; if she can work a little toward that, it's all she asks. I can tell you, she kindles me; she does, mother, really. She doesn't care a speck what she wears—only to have an elegant parlor. Well, she *has* got that; it's a regular dreamlike place to sit. She's going to have a tree in, next week; she says she wants to see me sitting under a tree. I believe it's some oriental idea; it has lately been introduced in Paris. She doesn't like French ideas as a general thing; but she says this has more nature than most. She has got so many of her own that I shouldn't think she would require to borrow any. I'd sit in a forest to hear her bring some of them out," Verena went on, with characteristic raciness. "She just quivers when she describes what our sex has been

through. It's so interesting to me to hear what I have always felt. If she wasn't afraid of facing the public, she would go far ahead of me. But she doesn't want to speak herself; she only wants to call me out. Mother, if she doesn't attract attention to me there isn't any attention to be attracted. She says I have got the gift of expression—it doesn't matter where it comes from. She says it's a great advantage to a movement to be personified in a bright young figure. Well, of course I'm young, and I feel bright enough when once I get started. She says my serenity while exposed to the gaze of hundreds is in itself a qualification; in fact, she seems to think my serenity is quite God-given. She hasn't got much of it herself; she's the most emotional woman I have met, up to now. She wants to know how I can speak the way I do unless I feel; and of course I tell her I do feel, so far as I realize. She seems to be realizing all the time; I never saw any one that took so little rest. She says I ought to do something great, and she makes me feel as if I should. She says I ought to have a wide influence, if I can obtain the ear of the public; and I say to her that if I do it will be all her influence."

Selah Tarrant looked at all this from a higher standpoint than his wife; at least such an altitude on his part was to be inferred from his increased solemnity. He committed himself to no precipitate elation at the idea of his daughter's being taken up by a patroness of movements who happened to have money; he looked at his child only from the point of view of the service she might render to humanity. To keep her ideal pointing in the right direction, to guide and animate her moral life—this was a duty more imperative for a parent so closely identified with revelations and panaceas than seeing that she formed profitable worldly connections. He was "off," moreover, so much of the time that he could keep little account of her comings and goings, and he had an air of being but vaguely aware of whom Miss Chancellor, the object now of his wife's perpetual reference, might be. Verena's initial appearance in Boston, as he called her performance at Miss Birdseye's, had been a great success; and this reflection added, as I say, to his habitually sacerdotal expression. He looked like the priest of a religion that was passing through the stage of miracles; he carried his responsibility in the general elongation of his person, of his gestures (his hands were now always in the air, as if he were being photographed in postures), of his words and sentences, as well as in his smile, as noiseless as a patent hinge, and in the folds of his eternal waterproof. He was incapable of giving an offhand answer or opinion on the simplest occasion, and his tone of high deliberation increased in proportion as the subject was trivial or domestic. If his wife asked him at dinner if the potatoes were good, he replied that they were strikingly fine (he used to speak of the newspaper as "fine"—he applied this term to objects the most dissimilar), and embarked on a parallel worthy of Plutarch, in which he compared them with other specimens of the same vegetable. He produced, or would have liked to produce, the impression of looking above and beyond everything, of not caring for the immediate, of reckoning only with the long run. In reality he had one all-absorbing solicitude—the desire to get paragraphs put into the newspapers, paragraphs of which he had hitherto been the subject, but of which he was now to divide the glory with his daughter. The newspapers were his world, the richest expression, in his eyes, of human life; and, for him, if a diviner day was to come upon earth, it would be brought about by copious advertisement in the daily prints. He looked with longing for the moment when Verena should be advertised among the "personals," and to his mind the supremely happy people were those (and there were a good many of them) of whom there was some journalistic mention every day in the year. Nothing less than this would really have satisfied Selah Tarrant; his ideal of bliss was to be as regularly and indispensably a component part of the newspaper as the title and date, or the list of fires, or the column of Western jokes. The vision of that publicity haunted his dreams, and he would glady have sacrificed to it the innermost sanctities of home. Human existence to him, indeed, was a huge publicity, in which the only fault was that it was sometimes not sufficiently effective. There had been a Spiritualist paper of old which he used to pervade; but he could not persuade himself that through this medium his personality had attracted general attention; and, moreover, the sheet, as he said, was played out anyway. Success was not success so long as his daughter's *physique,* the rumor of her engagement, were not included in the "Jottings," with the certainty of being extensively copied.

The account of her exploits in the West had not made their way to the seaboard with the promptitude that he had looked for; the reason of this being, he supposed, that the few addresses she had made had not been lectures, announced in advance, to which tickets had been sold, but incidents, of abrupt occurrence, of certain multitudinous meetings, where there had been other performers better known to fame. They had brought in no money; they had been delivered only for the good of the cause. If it could only be known that she spoke for nothing, that might deepen the reverberation; the only trouble was that her speaking for nothing was not the way to remind him that he had a remunerative daughter. It was not the way to stand out so very much either, Selah Tarrant felt; for there were plenty of others that knew how to make as little money as she would. To speak—that was the one thing that most people were willing to do for nothing; it was not a line in which it was easy to appear conspicuously disinterested. Disinterestedness, too, was incompatible with receipts; and receipts were what Selah Tarrant was, in his own parlance, after. He wished to bring about the day when they would flow in freely; the reader perhaps sees the gesture with which, in his colloquies with himself, he accompanied this mental image.

It seemed to him at present that the fruitful time was not far off; it had been brought appreciably

nearer by that fortunate evening at Miss Birdseye's. If Mrs. Farrinder could be induced to write an "open letter" about Verena, that would do more than anything else. Selah was not remarkable for delicacy of perception, but he knew the world he lived in well enough to be aware that Mrs. Farrinder was liable to rear up, as they used to say down in Pennsylvania, where he lived before he began to peddle lead pencils. She wouldn't always take things as you might expect, and if it didn't meet her views to pay a public tribute to Verena, there wasn't any way known to Tarrant's ingenious mind of getting round her. If it was a question of a favor from Mrs. Farrinder, you just had to wait for it, as you would for a rise in the thermometer. He had told Miss Birdseye what he would like, and she seemed to think, from the way their celebrated friend had been affected, that the idea might take her some day of just letting the public know all she had felt. She was off somewhere now (since that evening), but Miss Birdseye had an idea that when she was back in Roxbury she would send for Verena and give her a few points. Meanwhile, at any rate, Selah was sure he had a card; he felt there was money in the air. It might already be said there were receipts from Charles Street; that rich, peculiar young woman seemed to want to lavish herself. He pretended, as I have intimated, not to notice this; but he never saw so much as when he had his eyes fixed on the cornice. He had no doubt that if he should make up his mind to take a hall some night, she would tell him where the bill might be sent. That was what he was thinking of now, whether he had better take a hall right away, so that Verena might leap at a bound into renown, or wait till she had made a few more appearances in private, so that curiosity might be worked up.

These meditations accompanied him in his multifarious wanderings through the streets and the suburbs of the New England capital. As I have also mentioned, he was absent for hours—long periods during which Mrs. Tarrant, sustaining nature with a hard-boiled egg and a doughnut, wondered how in the world he stayed his stomach. He never wanted anything but a piece of pie when he came in; the only thing about which he was particular was that it should be served up hot. She had a private conviction that he partook, at the houses of his lady patients, of little lunches; she applied this term to any episodical repast, at any hour of the twenty-four. It is but fair to add that once, when she betrayed her suspicion, Selah remarked that the only refreshment *he* ever wanted was the sense that he was doing some good. This effort with him had many forms; it involved, among other things, a perpetual perambulation of the streets, a haunting of horsecars, railway-stations, shops that were "selling off." But the places that knew him best were the offices of the newspapers and the vestibules of the hotels—the big marble-paved chambers of informal reunion which offer to the streets, through high glass plates, the sight of the American citizen suspended by his heels. Here, amid the piled-up luggage, the convenient spittoons, the elbowing loungers, the disconsolate "guests," the truculent Irish porters, the rows of shaggy-backed men in strange hats, writing letters at a table inlaid with advertisements, Selah Tarrant made innumerable contemplative stations. He could not have told you, at any particular moment, what he was doing; he only had a general sense that such places were national nerve-centers, and that the more one looked in, the more one was "on the spot." The *penetralia* of the daily press were, however, still more fascinating, and the fact that they were less accessible, that here he found barriers in his path, only added to the zest of forcing an entrance. He abounded in pretexts; he even sometimes brought contributions; he was persistent and penetrating, he was known as the irrepressible Tarrant. He hung about, sat too long, took up the time of busy people, edged into the printing-rooms when he had been eliminated from the office, talked with the compositors till they set up his remarks by mistake, and to the newsboys when the compositors had turned their backs. He was always trying to find out what was "going in"; he would have liked to go in himself, bodily, and, failing in this, he hoped to get advertisements inserted gratis. The wish of his soul was that he might be interviewed; that made him hover at the editorial elbow. Once he thought he had been, and the headings, five or six deep, danced for days before his eyes; but the report never appeared. He expected his revenge for this the day after Verena should have burst forth; he saw the attitude in which he should receive the emissaries who would come after his daughter.

14

"We ought to have someone to meet her," Mrs. Tarrant said; "I presume she wouldn't care to come out just to see us." "She," between the mother and the daughter, at this period, could refer only to Olive Chancellor, who was discussed in the little house at Cambridge at all hours and from every possible point of view. It was never Verena now who began, for she had grown rather weary of the topic; she had her own ways of thinking of it, which were not her mother's, and if she lent herself to this lady's extensive considerations it was because that was the best way of keeping her thoughts to herself.

Mrs. Tarrant had an idea that she (Mrs. Tarrant) liked to study people, and that she was now engaged in an analysis of Miss Chancellor. It carried her far, and she came out at unexpected times with her results. It was still her purpose to interpret the world to the ingenuous mind of her daughter, and she translated Miss Chancellor with a confidence which made little account of the fact that she had seen her but once, while Verena had this advantage nearly every day. Verena felt that by this time she knew Olive very well, and her mother's most complicated versions of motive and temperament (Mrs. Tarrant, with the most imperfect idea of the meaning of the term, was always talking about people's temperament), rendered small justice to the phenomena it was now her privilege to observe in Charles Street. Olive was much more remarkable than Mrs. Tarrant suspected, remarkable as Mrs. Tarrant believed her to be. She had opened Verena's eyes to extraordinary pictures, made the girl believe that she had a heavenly mission, given her, as we have seen, quite a new measure of the interest of life. These were larger consequences than the possibility of meeting the leaders of society at Olive's house. She had met no one, as yet, but Mrs. Luna; her new friend seemed to wish to keep her quite for herself. This was the only reproach that Mrs. Tarrant directed to the new friend as yet; she was disappointed that Verena had not obtained more insight into the world of fashion. It was one of the prime articles of her faith that the world of fashion was wicked and hollow, and, moreover, Verena told her that Miss Chancellor loathed and despised it. She could not have informed you wherein it would profit her daughter (for the way those ladies shrank from any new gospel was notorious); nevertheless she was vexed that Verena shouldn't come back to her with a little more of the fragrance of Beacon Street. The girl herself would have been the most interested person in the world if she had not been the most resigned; she took all that was given her and was grateful, and missed nothing that was withheld; she was the most extraordinary mixture of eagerness and docility. Mrs. Tarrant theorized about temperaments and she loved her daughter; but she was only vaguely aware of the fact that she had at her side the sweetest flower of character (as one might say) that had ever bloomed on earth. She was proud of Verena's brightness, and of her special talent; but the commonness of her own surface was a non-conductor of the girl's quality. Therefore she thought that it would add to her success in life to know a few high-flyers, if only to put them to shame; as if anything could add to Verena's success, as if it were not supreme success simply to have been made as she was made.

Mrs. Tarrant had gone into town to call upon Miss Chancellor; she carried out this resolve, on which she had bestowed infinite consideration, independently of Verena. She had decided that she had a pretext; her dignity required one, for she felt that at present the antique pride of the Greenstreets was terribly at the mercy of her curiosity. She wished to see Miss Chancellor again, and to see her among her charming appurtenances, which Verena had described to her with great minuteness. The pretext that she would have valued most was wanting—that of Olive's having come out to Cambridge to pay the visit that had been solicited from the first; so she had to take the next best—she had to say to herself that it was her duty to see what she should think of a place where her daughter spent so much time. To Miss Chancellor she would appear to have come to thank her for her hospitality; she knew, in advance, just the air she should take (or she fancied she knew it—Mrs. Tarrant's airs were not always what she supposed), just the *nuance* (she had also an impression she knew a little French) of her tone. Olive, after the lapse of weeks, still showed no symptoms of presenting herself, and Mrs. Tarrant rebuked Verena with some sternness for not having made her feel that this attention was due to the mother of her friend. Verena could scarcely say to her she guessed Miss Chancellor didn't think much of that personage, true as it was that the girl had discerned this angular fact, which she attributed to Olive's extraordinary comprehensiveness of view. Verena herself did not suppose that her mother occupied a very important place in the universe; and Miss Chancellor never looked at anything smaller than that. Nor was she free to report (she was certainly now less frank at home, and, moreover, the suspicion was only just becoming distinct to her) that Olive would like to detach her from her parents altogether, and was therefore not interested in appearing to cultivate relations with them. Mrs. Tarrant, I may mention, had a further motive: she was consumed with the desire to behold Mrs. Luna. This circumstance may operate as a proof that the aridity of her life was great, and if

it should have that effect I shall not be able to gainsay it. She had seen all the people who went to lectures, but there were hours when she desired, for a change, to see some who didn't go; and Mrs. Luna, from Verena's description of her, summed up the characteristics of this eccentric class.

Verena had given great attention to Olive's brilliant sister; she had told her friend everything now—everything but one little secret, namely, that if she could have chosen at the beginning she would have liked to resemble Mrs. Luna. This lady fascinated her, carried off her imagination to strange lands; she should enjoy so much a long evening with her alone, when she might ask her ten thousand questions. But she never saw her alone, never saw her at all but in glimpses. Adeline flitted in and out, dressed for dinners and concerts, always saying something worldly to the young woman from Cambridge, and something to Olive that had a freedom which she herself would probably never arrive at (a failure of foresight on Verena's part). But Miss Chancellor never detained her, never gave Verena a chance to see her, never appeared to imagine that she could have the least interest in such a person; only took up the subject again after Adeline had left them—the subject, of course, which was always the same, the subject of what they should do together for their suffering sex. It was not that Verena was not interested in that—gracious, no; it opened up before her, in those wonderful colloquies with Olive, in the most inspiring way; but her fancy would make a dart to right or left when other game crossed their path, and her companion led her, intellectually, a dance in which her feet—that is, her head—failed her at times for weariness. Mrs. Tarrant found Miss Chancellor at home, but she was not gratified by even the most transient glimpse of Mrs. Luna; a fact which, in her heart, Verena regarded as fortunate, inasmuch as (she said to herself) if her mother, returning from Charles Street, began to explain Miss Chancellor to her with fresh energy, and as if she (Verena) had never seen her, and up to this time they had had nothing to say about her, to what developments (of the same sort) would not an encounter with Adeline have given rise?

When Verena at last said to her friend that she thought she ought to come out to Cambridge—she didn't understand why she didn't—Olive expressed her reasons very frankly, admitted that she was jealous, that she didn't wish to think of the girl's belonging to any one but herself. Mr. and Mrs. Tarrant would have authority, opposed claims, and she didn't wish to see them, to remember that they existed. This was true, so far as it went; but Olive could not tell Verena everything—could not tell her that she hated that dreadful pair at Cambridge. As we know, she had forbidden herself this emotion as regards individuals; and she flattered herself that she considered the Tarrants as a type, a deplorable one, a class that, with the public at large, discredited the cause of the new truths. She had talked them over with Miss Birdseye (Olive was always looking after her now and giving her things—the good lady appeared at this period in wonderful caps and shawls—for she felt she couldn't thank her enough), and even Doctor Prance's fellow-lodger, whose animosity to flourishing evils lived in the happiest (though the most illicit) union with the mania for finding excuses, even Miss Birdseye was obliged to confess that if you came to examine his record, poor Selah didn't amount to so very much. How little he amounted to Olive perceived after she had made Verena talk, as the girl did immensely about her father and mother—quite unconscious, meanwhile, of the conclusions she suggested to Miss Chancellor. Tarrant was a moralist without moral sense—that was very clear to Olive as she listened to the history of his daughter's childhood and youth, which Verena related with an extraordinary artless vividness. This narrative, tremendously fascinating to Miss Chancellor, made her feel in all sorts of ways—prompted her to ask herself whether the girl was also destitute of the perception of right and wrong. No, she was only supremely innocent; she didn't understand, she didn't interpret nor see the *portée* of what she described; she had no idea whatever of judging her parents. Olive had wished to "realize" the conditions in which her wonderful young friend (she thought her more wonderful every day) had developed, and to this end, as I have related, she prompted her to infinite discourse. But now she was satisfied, the realization was complete, and what she would have liked to impose on the girl was an effectual rupture with her past. That past she by no means absolutely deplored, for it had the merit of having initiated Verena (and her patroness, through her agency) into the miseries and mysteries of the People. It was her theory that Verena (in spite of the blood of the Greenstreets, and, after all, who were they?) was a flower of the great Democracy, and that it was impossible to have had an origin less distinguished than Tarrant himself. His birth, in some unheard-of place in Pennsylvania, was quite inexpressibly low, and Olive would have been much disappointed if it had been wanting in this defect. She liked to think that Verena, in her childhood, had known almost the extremity of poverty, and there was a kind of ferocity in the joy with which she reflected that there had been moments when this delicate creature came near (if the pinch had only lasted a little longer) to literally going without food. These things added to her value for Olive; they made that young lady feel that their common undertaking would, in consequence, be so much more serious. It is always supposed that revolutionists have been goaded, and the goading would have been rather deficient here were it not for such happy accidents in Verena's past. When she conveyed from her mother a summons to Cambridge for a particular occasion, Olive perceived that the great effort must now be made. Great efforts were nothing new to her—it was a great effort to live at all —but this one appeared to her exceptionally cruel. She determined, however, to make it, promising herself that her first visit to Mrs. Tarrant should also be her last. Her only consolation was that she expected to suffer intensely; for the prospect of suffering was

always, spiritually speaking, so much cash in her pocket. It was arranged that Olive should come to tea (the repast that Selah designated as his supper), when Mrs. Tarrant, as we have seen, desired to do her honor by inviting another guest. This guest, after much deliberation between that lady and Verena, was selected, and the first person Olive saw on entering the little parlor in Cambridge was a young man with hair prematurely, or, as one felt that one should say, precociously white, whom she had a vague impression she had encountered before, and who was introduced to her as Mr. Matthias Pardon.

She suffered less than she had hoped—she was so taken up with the consideration of Verena's interior. It was as bad as she could have desired; desired in order to feel that (to take her out of such a *milieu* as that) she should have a right to draw her altogether to herself. Olive wished more and more to extract some definite pledge from her; she could hardly say what it had best be as yet; she only felt that it must be something that would have an absolute sanctity for Verena and would bind them together for life. On this occasion it seemed to shape itself in her mind; she began to see what it ought to be, though she also saw that she would perhaps have to wait awhile. Mrs. Tarrant, too, in her own house, became now a complete figure; there was no manner of doubt left as to her being vulgar. Olive Chancellor despised vulgarity, had a scent for it which she followed up in her own family, so that often, with a rising flush, she detected the taint even in Adeline. There were times, indeed, when every one seemed to have it, every one but Miss Birdseye (who had nothing to do with it—she was an antique) and the poorest, humblest people. The toilers and spinners, the very obscure, these were the only persons who were safe from it. Miss Chancellor would have been much happier if the movements she was interested in could have been carried on only by the people she liked, and it revolutions, somehow, didn't always have to begin with one's self—with internal convulsions, sacrifices, executions. A common end, unfortunately, however fine as regards a special result, does not make community impersonal.

Mrs. Tarrant, with her soft corpulence, looked to her guest very bleached and tumid; her complexion had a kind of withered glaze; her hair, very scanty, was drawn off her forehead *à la Chinoise;* she had no eyebrows, and her eyes seemed to stare, like those of a figure of wax. When she talked and wished to insist, and she was always insisting, she puckered and distorted her face, with an effort to express the inexpressible, which turned out, after all, to be nothing. She had a kind of doleful elegance, tried to be confidential, lowered her voice and looked as if she wished to establish a secret understanding, in order to ask her visitor if she would venture on an apple-fritter. She wore a flowing mantle, which resembled her husband's waterproof —a garment which, when she turned to her daughter or talked about her, might have passed for the robe of a sort of priestess of maternity. She endeavored to keep the conversation in a channel which would enable her to ask sudden incoherent questions of Olive, mainly as to whether she knew the principal ladies (the expression was Mrs. Tarrant's), not only in Boston, but in the other cities which, in her nomadic course, she herself had visited. Olive knew some of them, and of some of them had never heard; but she was irritated, and pretended a universal ignorance (she was conscious that she had never told so many fibs), by which her hostess was much disconcerted, although her questions had apparently been questions pure and simple, leading nowhither and without bearings on any new truth.

Tarrant, however, kept an eye in that direction; he was solemnly civil to Miss Chancellor, handed her the dishes at table over and over again, and ventured to intimate that the apple fritters were very fine; but, save for this, alluded to nothing more trivial than the regeneration of humanity and the strong hope he felt that Miss Birdseye would again have one of her delightful gatherings. With regard to this latter point he explained that it was not in order that he might again present his daughter to the company, but simply because on such occasions there was a valuable interchange of hopeful thought, a contact of mind with mind. If Verena had anything suggestive to contribute to the social problem, the opportunity would come —that was part of their faith. They couldn't reach out for it and try and push their way; if they were wanted, their hour would strike; if they were not, they would just keep still and let others press forward who seemed to be called. If they were called, they would know it; and if they weren't, they could just hold on to each other as they had always done. Tarrant was very fond of alternatives, and he mentioned several others; it was never his fault if his listeners failed to think him impartial. They hadn't much, as Miss Chancellor could see; she could tell by their manner of life that they hadn't raked in the dollars; but they had faith that, whether one raised one's voice or simply worked on in silence, the principal difficulties would straighten themselves out; and they had also a considerable experience of great questions. Tarrant spoke as if, as a family, they were prepared to take charge of them on moderate terms. He always said "ma'am" in speaking to Olive, to whom, moreover, the air had never been so filled with the sound of her own name. It was always in her ear, save when Mrs. Tarrant and Verena conversed in prolonged and ingenuous asides; this was still for her benefit, but the pronoun sufficed them. She had wished to judge Doctor Tarrant (not that she believed he had come honestly by his title), to make up her mind. She had done these things now, and she expressed to herself the kind of man she believed him to be in reflecting that if she should offer him ten thousand dollars to renounce all claim to Verena, keeping—he and his wife —clear of her for the rest of time, he would probably say, with his fearful smile, "Make it twenty, money down, and I'll do it." Some image of this transaction, as one of the possibilities of the future, outlined itself for Olive among the moral incisions of that evening. It seemed implied in the very place, the bald bareness of Tarrant's temporary lair, a wooden cottage, with a rough front yard, a little naked piazza, which seemed rather to expose than to protect, facing upon an unpaved road, in which the footway was overlaid with a strip of planks. These planks were embedded in ice or in liquid thaw, according to the momentary mood of the weather, and the advancing pedestrian traversed them in the attitude, and with a good deal of the suspense, of a ropedancer. There was nothing in the house to speak of; nothing, to Olive's sense, but a smell of kerosene; though she had a consciousness of sitting down somewhere—the object creaked and rocked beneath her—and of the table at tea being covered with a cloth stamped in bright colors.

As regards the pecuniary transaction with Selah, it was strange how she should have seen it through the conviction that Verena would never give up her parents. Olive was sure that she would never turn her back upon them, would always share with them. She would have despised her had she thought her capable of another course; yet it baffled her to understand why, when parents were so trashy, this natural law should not be suspended. Such a question brought her back, however, to her perpetual enigma, the mystery she had already turned over in her mind for hours together —the wonder of such people being Verena's progenitors at all. She had explained it, as we explain all exceptional things, by making the part, as the French say, of the miraculous. She had come to consider the girl as a wonder of wonders, to hold that no human origin, however congruous it might superficially appear, would sufficiently account for her; that her springing up between Selah and his wife was an exquisite whim of the creative force; and that in such a case a few shades more or less of the inexplicable didn't matter. It was notorious that great beauties, great geniuses, great characters, take their own times and places for coming into the world, leaving the gaping spectators to make them "fit in," and holding from far-off ancestors, or even, perhaps, straight from the divine generosity, much more than from their ugly or stupid progenitors. They were incalculable phenomena, anyway, as Selah would have said. Verena, for Olive, was the very type and model of the "gifted being"; her qualities had not been bought and paid for; they were like some brilliant birthday-present, left at the door by an unknown messenger, to be delightful forever as an inexhaustible legacy, and amusing forever from the obscurity of its source. They were superabundantly crude as yet—happily for Olive, who promised herself, as we know, to train and polish them—but they were as genuine as fruit and flowers, as the glow of the fire or the plash of water. For her scrutinizing friend Verena had the disposition of the artist, the spirit to which all charming forms come easily and naturally. It required an effort at first to imagine an artist so untaught, so mistaught, so poor in experience; but then it required

an effort also to imagine people like the old Tarrants, or a life so full as her life had been of ugly things. Only an exquisite creature could have resisted such associations, only a girl who had some natural light, some divine spark of taste. There were people like that, fresh from the hand of Omnipotence; they were far from common, but their existence was as incontestable as it was beneficent.

Tarrant's talk about his daughter, her prospects, her enthusiasm, was terribly painful to Olive; it brought back to her what she had suffered already from the idea that he laid his hands upon her to make her speak. That he should be mixed up in any way with this exercise of her genius was a great injury to the cause, and Olive had already determined that in future Verena should dispense with his cooperation. The girl had virtually confessed that she lent herself to it only because it gave him pleasure, and that anything else would do as well, anything that would make her quiet a little before she began to "give out." Olive took upon herself to believe that *she* could make her quiet, though, certainly, she had never had that effect upon any one; she would mount the platform with Verena if necessary, and lay her hands upon her head. Why in the world had a perverse fate decreed that Tarrant should take an interest in the affairs of Woman—as if she wanted *his* aid to arrive at her goal; a charlatan of the poor, lean, shabby sort, without the humor, brilliancy, prestige, which sometimes throw a drapery over shallowness? Mr. Pardon evidently took an interest as well, and there was something in his appearance that seemed to say that his sympathy would not be dangerous. He was much at his ease, plainly, beneath the roof of the Tarrants, and Olive reflected that though Verena had told her much about him, she had not given her the idea that he was as intimate as that. What she had mainly said was that he sometimes took her to the theatre. Olive could enter, to a certain extent, into that; she herself had had a phase (some time after her father's death—her mother's had preceded his—when she bought the little house in Charles Street and began to live alone), during which she accompanied gentlemen to respectable places of amusement. She was accordingly not shocked at the idea of such adventures on Verena's part; than which, indeed, judging from her own experience, nothing could well have been less adventurous. Her recollections of these expeditions were as of something solemn and edifying—of the earnest interest in her welfare exhibited by her companion (there were few occasions on which the young Bostonian appeared to more advantage), of the comfort of other friends sitting near, who were sure to know whom she was with, of serious discussion between the acts in regard to the behavior of the characters in the piece, and of the speech at the end with which, as the young man quitted her at her door, she rewarded his civility—"I must thank you for a very pleasant evening." She always felt that she made that too prim; her lips stiffened themselves as she spoke. But the whole affair had always a primness; this was discernible even to Olive's very limited sense of humor. It was not so religious as going to evening-service at King's Chapel; but it was the next thing to it. Of course all girls didn't do it; there were families that viewed such a custom with disfavor. But this was where the girls were of the romping sort; there had to be some things they were known not to do. As a general thing, moreover, the practice was confined to the decorous; it was a sign of culture and quiet tastes. All this made it innocent for Verena, whose life had exposed her to much worse dangers; but the thing referred itself in Olive's mind to a danger which cast a perpetual shadow there—the possibility of the girl's embarking with some ingenuous youth on an expedition that would last much longer than an evening. She was haunted, in a word, with the fear that Verena would marry, a fate to which she was altogether unprepared to surrender her; and this made her look with suspicion upon all male acquaintance.

Mr. Pardon was not the only one she knew; she had an example of the rest in the persons of two young Harvard law students, who presented themselves after tea on this same occasion. As they sat there Olive wondered whether Verena had kept something from her, whether she were, after all (like so many other girls in Cambridge), a college-"belle," an object of frequentation to undergraduates. It was natural that at the seat of a big university there should be girls like that, with students dangling after them, but she didn't want Verena to be one of them. There were some that received the Seniors and Juniors; others that were accessible to Sophomores and Freshmen. Certain young ladies distinguished the professional students; there was a group, even, that was on the best terms with the young men who were studying for the Unitarian ministry in that queer little barrack at the end of Divinity Avenue. The advent of the new visitors made Mrs. Tarrant bustle immensely; but after she had caused every one to change places two or three times with every one else the company subsided into a circle which was occasionally broken by wandering movements on the part of her husband, who, in the absence of anything to say on any subject whatever, placed himself at different points in listening attitudes, shaking his head slowly up and down, and gazing at the carpet with an air of supernatural attention. Mrs. Tarrant asked the young men from the Law School about their studies, and whether they meant to follow them up seriously; said she thought some of the laws were very unjust, and she hoped they meant to try and improve them. She had suffered by the laws herself, at the time her father died; she hadn't got half the prop'ty she should have got if they had been different. She thought they should be for public matters, not for people's private affairs; the idea always seemed to her to keep you down if you *were* down, and to hedge you in with difficulties. Sometimes she thought it was a wonder how she had developed in the face of so many; but it was a proof that freedom was everywhere, if you only knew how to look for it.

The two young men were in the best humor; they greeted these sallies with a merriment of which,

though it was courteous in form, Olive was by no means unable to define the spirit. They talked naturally more with Verena than with her mother; and while they were so engaged Mrs. Tarrant explained to her who they were, and how one of them, the smaller, who was not quite so spruce, had brought the other, his particular friend, to introduce him. This friend, Mr. Burrage, was from New York; he was very fashionable, he went out a great deal in Boston ("I have no doubt you know some of the places," said Mrs. Tarrant) ; his "fam'ly" was very rich.

"Well, he knows plenty of that sort," Mrs. Tarrant went on, "but he felt unsatisfied; he didn't know any one like *us.* He told Mr. Gracie (that's the little one) that he felt as if he *must;* it seemed as if he couldn't hold out. So we told Mr. Gracie, of course, to bring him right round. Well, I hope he'll get something from us, I'm sure. He has been reported to be engaged to Miss Winkworth; I have no doubt you know who I mean. But Mr. Gracie says he hasn't looked at her more than twice. That's the way rumors fly round in that set, I presume. Well, I am glad we are not in it, wherever we are! Mr. Gracie is very different; he is intensely plain, but I believe he is very learned. You don't think him plain? Oh, you don't know? Well, I suppose you don't care, you must see so many. But I must say, when a young man looks like that, I call him painfully plain. I heard Doctor Tarrant make the remark the last time he was here. I don't say but what the plainest are the best. Well, I had no idea we were going to have a party when I asked you. I wonder whether Verena hadn't better hand the cake; we generally find the students enjoy it so much."

This office was ultimately delegated to Selah, who, after a considerable absence, reappeared with a dish of dainties, which he presented successively to each member of the company. Olive saw Verena lavish her smiles on Mr. Gracie and Mr. Burrage; the liveliest relation had established itself, and the latter gentleman in especial abounded in appreciative laughter. It might have been fancied, just from looking at the group, that Verena's vocation was to smile and talk with young men who bent toward her; might have been fancied, that is, by a person less sure of the contrary than Olive, who had reason to know that a "gifted being" is sent into the world for a very different purpose, and that making the time pass pleasantly for conceited young men is the last duty you are bound to think of if you happen to have a talent for embodying a cause. Olive tried to be glad that her friend had the richness of nature that makes a woman gracious without latent purposes; she reflected that Verena was not in the smallest degree a flirt, that she was only enchantingly and universally genial, that nature had given her a beautiful smile, which fell impartially on every one, man and woman, alike. Olive may have been right, but it shall be confided to the reader that in reality she never knew, by any sense of her own, whether Verena were a flirt or not. This young lady could not possibly have told her (even if she herself knew, which she didn't), and Olive, destitute for the quality, had no means of taking the measure in another of the subtle feminine desire to please. She could see the difference between Mr. Gracie and Mr. Burrage; her being bored by Mrs. Tarrant's attempting to point it out is perhaps a proof of that. It was a curious incident of her zeal for the regeneration of her sex that manly things were, perhaps on the whole, what she understood best. Mr. Burrage was rather a handsome youth, with a laughing, clever face, a certain sumptuosity of apparel, an air of belonging to the "fast set"—a precocious, good-natured man of the world, curious of new sensations and containing, perhaps, the making of a *dilettante.* Being, doubtless, a little ambitious, and liking to flatter himself that he appreciated worth in lowly forms, he had associated himself with the ruder but at the same time acuter personality of a genuine son of New England, who had a harder head than his own and a humor in reality more cynical, and who, having earlier knowledge of the Tarrants, had undertaken to show him something indigenous and curious, possibly even fascinating. Mr. Gracie was short, with a big head; he wore eyeglasses, looked unkempt, almost rustic, and said good things with his ugly lips. Verena had replies for a good many of them, and a pretty color came into her face as she talked. Olive could see that she produced herself quite as well as one of these gentlemen had foretold the other that she would. Miss Chancellor knew what had passed between them as well as if she had heard it; Mr. Gracie had promised that he would lead her on, that she should justify his description and prove the raciest of her class. They would laugh about her as they went away, lighting their cigars, and for many days afterwards their discourse would be enlivened with quotations from the "women's rights girl."

It was amazing how many ways men had of being antipathetic; these two were very different from Basil Ransom, and different from each other, and yet the manner of each conveyed an insult to one's womanhood. The worst of the case was that Verena would be sure not to perceive this outrage—not to dislike them in consequence. There were so many things that she hadn't yet learned to dislike, in spite of her friend's earnest efforts to teach her. She had the idea vividly (that was the marvel) of the cruelty of man, of his immemorial injustice; but it remained abstract, platonic; she didn't detest him in consequence. What was the use of her having that sharp, inspired vision of the history of the sex (it was, as she had said herself, exactly like Joan of Arc's absolutely supernatural apprehension of the state of France), if she wasn't going to carry it out, if she was going to behave as the ordinary pusillanimous, conventional young lady? It was all very well for her to have said that first day that she would renounce: did she look, at such a moment as this, like a young woman who had renounced? Suppose this glittering, laughing Burrage youth, with his chains and rings and shining shoes, should fall in love with her and try to bribe her, with his great possessions, to practice renunciations of another kind—to give up her holy work and to go with

him to New York, there to live as his wife, partly bullied, partly pampered, in the accustomed Burrage manner? There was as little comfort for Olive as there had been on the whole alarm in the recollection of that offhand speech of Verena's about her preference for "free unions." This had been mere maiden flippancy; she had not known the meaning of what she said. Though she had grown up among people who took for granted all sorts of queer laxities, she had kept the consummate innocence of the American girl, that innocence which was the greatest of all, for it had survived the abolition of walls and locks; and of the various remarks that had dropped from Verena expressing this quality that startling observation certainly expressed it most. It implied, at any rate, that unions of some kind or other had her approval, and did not exclude the dangers that might arise from encounters with young men in search of sensations.

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Mr. Pardon, as Olive observed, was a little out of this combination; but he was not a person to allow himself to droop. He came and seated himself by Miss Chancellor and broached a literary subject; he asked her if she were following any of the current "serials" in the magazines. On her telling him that she never followed anything of that sort, he undertook a defense of the serial system, which she presently reminded him that she had not attacked. He was not discouraged by this retort, but glided gracefully off to the question of Mount Desert; conversation on some subject or other being evidently a necessity of his nature. He talked very quickly and softly, with words, and even sentences, imperfectly formed; there was a certain amiable flatness in his tone, and he abounded in exclamations—"Goodness gracious !" and "Mercy on us!"—not much in use among the sex whose profanity is apt to be coarse. He had small, fair features, remarkably neat, and pretty eyes, and a mustache that he caressed, and an air of juvenility much at variance with his grizzled locks, and the free familiar reference in which he was apt to indulge to his career as a journalist. His friends knew that in spite of his delicacy and his prattle he was what they called a live man; his appearance was perfectly reconcilable with a large degree of literary enterprise. It should be explained that for the most part they attached to this idea the same meaning as Selah Tarrant—a state of intimacy with the newspapers, the cultivation of the great arts of publicity. For this ingenuous son of his age all distinction between the person and the artist had ceased to exist; the writer was personal, the person food for newsboys, and everything and everyone were everyone's business. All things, with him, referred themselves to print, and print meant simply infinite reporting, a promptitude of announcement, abusive when necessary, or even when not, about his fellow-citizens. He poured contumely on their private life, on their personal appearance, with the best conscience in the world. His faith, again, was the faith of Selah Tarrant—that being in the newspapers is a condition of bliss, and that it would be fastidious to question the terms of the privilege. He was an *enfant de la balle,* as the French say; he had begun his career, at the age of fourteen, by going the rounds of the hotels, to cull flowers from the big, greasy registers which lie on the marble counters; and he might flatter himself that he had contributed in his measure, and on behalf of a vigilant public opinion, the pride of a democratic State, to the great end of preventing the American citizen from attempting clandestine journeys. Since then he had ascended other steps of the same ladder; he was the most brilliant young interviewer on the Boston press. He was particularly successful in drawing out the ladies; he had condensed into shorthand many of the most celebrated women of his time—some of these daughters of fame were very voluminous—and he was supposed to have a remarkably insinuating way of waiting upon *prime donne* and actresses the morning after their arrival, or sometimes the very evening, while their luggage was being brought up. He was only twenty-eight years old, and, with his hoary head, was a thoroughly modern young man; he had no idea of not taking advantage of all the modern conveniences. He regarded the mission of mankind upon earth as a perpetual evolution of telegrams; everything to him was very much the same, he had no sense of proportion or quality; but the newest thing was what came nearest exciting in his mind the sentiment of respect. He was an object of extreme admiration to Selah Tarrant, who believed that he had mastered all the secrets of success, and who, when Mrs. Tarrant remarked (as she had done more than once) that it looked as if Mr. Pardon was really coming after Verena, declared that if he was, he was one of the few young men he should want to see in that connection, one of the few he should be willing to allow to handle her. It was Tarrant's conviction that if Matthias Pardon should seek Verena in marriage, it would be with a view to producing her in public; and the advantage for the girl of having a husband who was at the same time reporter, interviewer, manager, agent, who had the command of the principal "dailies," would write her up and work her, as it were, scientifically—the attraction of all this was too obvious to be insisted on. Matthias had a mean opinion of Tarrant, thought him quite second-rate, a votary of played-out causes. It was his impression that he himself was in love with Verena, but his passion was not a jealous one, and included a remarkable disposition to share the object of his affection with the American people.

He talked some time to Olive about Mount Desert, told her that in his letters he had described the company at the different hotels. He remarked, however, that a correspondent suffered a good deal today from the competition of the "lady-writers"; the sort of article they produced was sometimes more acceptable to the papers. He supposed she would be glad to hear that—he knew she was so interested in woman's having a free field. They certainly made lovely correspondents; they picked up something bright before you could turn round; there wasn't much you could keep away from them; you had to be lively if you wanted to get there first. Of course, they were naturally more chatty, and that was the style of literature that seemed to take most today; only they didn't write much but what ladies would want to

read. Of course, he knew there were millions of lady-readers, but he intimated that *he* didn't address himself exclusively to the gynecaeum; he tried to put in something that would interest all parties. If you read a lady's letter you knew pretty well in advance what you would find. Now, what he tried for was that you shouldn't have the least idea; he always tried to have something that would make you jump. Mr. Pardon was not conceited more, at least, than is proper when youth and success go hand in hand, and it was natural he should not know in what spirit Miss Chancellor listened to him. Being aware that she was a woman of culture his desire was simply to supply her with the pabulum that she would expect. She thought him very inferior; she had heard he was intensely bright, but there was probably some mistake; there couldn't be any danger for Verena from a mind that took merely a gossip's view of great tendencies. Besides, he wasn't half educated, and it was her belief, or at least her hope, that an educative process was now going on for Verena (under her own direction), which would enable her to make such a discovery for herself. Olive had a standing quarrel with the levity, the good-nature, of the judgments of the day; many of them seemed to her weak to imbecility, losing sight of all measures and standards, lavishing superlatives, delighted to be fooled. The age seemed to her relaxed and demoralized, and I believe she looked to the influx of the great feminine element to make it feel and speak more sharply.

"Well, it's a privilege to hear you two talk together," Mrs. Tarrant said to her; "it's what I call real conversation. It isn't often we have anything so fresh; it makes me feel as if I wanted to join in. I scarcely know whom to listen to most; Verena seems to be having such a time with those gentlemen. First I catch one thing and then another; it seems as if I couldn't take it all in. Perhaps I ought to pay more attention to Mr. Burrage; I don't want him to think we are not so cordial as they are in New York."

She decided to draw nearer to the trio on the other side of the room, for she had perceived (as she devoutly hoped Miss Chancellor had not), that Verena was endeavoring to persuade either of her companions to go and talk to her dear friend, and that these unscrupulous young men, after a glance over their shoulder, appeared to plead for remission, to intimate that this was not what they had come round for. Selah wandered out of the room again with his collection of cakes, and Mr. Pardon began to talk to Olive about Verena, to say that he felt as if he couldn't say all he did feel with regard to the interest she had shown in her. Olive could not imagine why he was called upon to say or to feel anything, and she gave him short answers; while the poor young man, unconscious of his doom, remarked that he hoped she wasn't going to exercise any influence that would prevent Miss Tarrant from taking the rank that belonged to her. He thought there was too much hanging back; he wanted to see her in a front seat; he wanted to see her name in the biggest kind of bills and her portrait in the windows of the stores. She had genius, there was no doubt of that, and she would take a new line altogether. She had charm, and there was a great demand for that nowadays in connection with new ideas. There were so many that seemed to have fallen dead for want of it. She ought to be carried straight ahead; she ought to walk right up to the top. There was a want of bold action; he didn't see what they were waiting for. He didn't suppose they were waiting till she was fifty years old; there were old ones enough in the field. He knew that Miss Chancellor appreciated the advantage of her girlhood, because Miss Verena had told him so. Her father was dreadfully slack, and the winter was ebbing away. Mr. Pardon went so far as to say that if Dr. Tarrant didn't see his way to do something, he should feel as if he should want to take hold himself. He expressed a hope at the same time that Olive had not any views that would lead her to bring her influence to bear to make Miss Verena hold back; also that she wouldn't consider that he pressed in too much. He knew that was a charge that people brought against newspapermen—that they were rather apt to cross the line. He only worried because he thought those who were no doubt nearer to Miss Verena than he could hope to be were not sufficiently alive. He knew that she had appeared in two or three parlors since that evening at Miss Birdseye's, and he had heard of the delightful occasion at Miss Chancellor's own house, where so many of the first families had been invited to meet her. (This was an allusion to a small luncheon-party that Olive had given, when Verena discoursed to a dozen matrons and spinsters, selected by her hostess with infinite consideration and many spiritual scruples; a report of the affair, presumably from the hand of the young Matthias, who naturally had not been present, appeared with extraordinary promptness in an evening-paper.) That was very well so far as it went, but he wanted something on another scale, something so big that people would have to go round if they wanted to get past. Then lowering his voice a little, he mentioned what it was: a lecture in the Music Hall, at fifty cents a ticket, without her father, right there on her own basis. He lowered his voice still more and revealed to Miss Chancellor his innermost thought, having first assured himself that Selah was still absent and that Mrs. Tarrant was inquiring of Mr. Burrage whether he visited much on the new land. The truth was, Miss Verena wanted to "shed" her father altogether; she didn't want him pawing round her that way before she began; it didn't add in the least to the attraction. Mr. Pardon expressed the conviction that Miss Chancellor agreed with him in this, and it required a great effort of mind on Olive's part, so small was her desire to act in concert with Mr. Pardon, to admit to herself that she did. She asked him, with a certain lofty coldness—he didn't make her shy, now, a bit—whether he took a great interest in the improvement of the position of women. The question appeared to strike the young man as abrupt and irrelevant, to come down on him from a height with which he was not accustomed to hold intercourse. He was used to quick operations, however, and he had

only a moment of bright blankness before replying:

"Oh, there is nothing I wouldn't do for the ladies; just give me a chance and you'll see."

Olive was silent a moment. "What I mean is—is your sympathy a sympathy with our sex, or a particular interest in Miss Tarrant?"

"Well, sympathy is just sympathy—that's all I can say. It takes in Miss Verena and it takes in all others—except the lady-correspondents," the young man added, with a jocosity which, as he perceived even at the moment, was lost on Verena's friend. He was not more successful when he went on: "It takes in even you, Miss Chancellor!"

Olive rose to her feet, hesitating; she wanted to go away, and yet she couldn't bear to leave Verena to be exploited, as she felt that she would be after her departure, that indeed she had already been, by those offensive young men. She had a strange sense, too, that her friend had neglected her for the last half-hour, had not been occupied with her, had placed a barrier between them—a barrier of broad male backs, of laughter that verged upon coarseness, of glancing smiles directed across the room, directed to Olive, which seemed rather to disconnect her with what was going forward on that side than to invite her to take part in it. If Verena recognized that Miss Chancellor was not in report, as her father said, when jocose young men ruled the scene, the discovery implied no great penetration; but the poor girl might have reflected further that to see it taken for granted that she was unadapted for such company could scarcely be more agreeable to Olive than to be dragged into it. This young lady's worst apprehensions were now justified by Mrs. Tarrant's crying to her that she must not go, as Mr. Burrage and Mr. Gracie were trying to persuade Verena to give them a little specimen of inspirational speaking, and she was sure her daughter would comply in a moment if Miss Chancellor would just tell her to compose herself. They had got to own up to it, Miss Chancellor could do more with her than anyone else; but Mr. Gracie and Mr. Burrage had excited her so that she was afraid it would be rather an unsuccessful effort. The whole group had got up, and Verena came to Olive with her hands outstretched and no signs of a bad conscience in her bright face.

"I know you like me to speak so much—I'll try to say something if you want me to. But I'm afraid there are not enough people; I can't do much with a small audience."

"I wish we had brought some of our friends—they would have been delighted to come if we had given them a chance," said Mr. Burrage. "There is an immense desire throughout the University to hear you, and there is no such sympathetic audience as an audience of Harvard men. Gracie and I are only two, but Gracie is a host in himself, and I am sure he will say as much of me." The young man spoke these words freely and lightly, smiling at Verena, and even a little at Olive, with the air of one to whom a mastery of clever "chaff" was commonly attributed.

"Mr. Burrage listens even better than he talks," his companion declared. "We have the habit of attention at lectures, you know. To be lectured by you would be an advantage indeed. We are sunk in ignorance and prejudice."

"Ah, my prejudices," Burrage went on; "if you could see them—I assure you they are something monstrous!"

"Give them a regular ducking and make them gasp," Matthias Pardon cried. "If you want an opportunity to act on Harvard College, now's your chance. These gentlemen will carry the news; it will be the narrow end of the wedge."

"I can't tell what you like," Verena said, still looking into Olive's eyes.

"I'm sure Miss Chancellor likes everything here," Mrs. Tarrant remarked, with a noble confidence.

Selah had reappeared by this time; his lofty, contemplative person was framed by the doorway. "Want to try a little inspiration?" he inquired, looking round on the circle with an encouraging inflection.

"I'll do it alone, if you prefer," Verena said, soothingly to her friend. "It might be a good chance to try without father."

"You don't mean to say you ain't going to be supported?" Mrs. Tarrant exclaimed, with dismay.

"Ah, I beseech you, give us the whole program—don't omit any leading feature!" Mr. Burrage was heard to plead.

"My only interest is to draw her out," said Selah, defending his integrity. "I will drop right out if I don't seem to vitalize. I have no desire to draw attention to my own poor gifts." This declaration appeared to be addressed to Miss Chancellor.

"Well, there will be more inspiration if you don't touch her," Matthias Pardon said to him. "It will seem to come right down from—well, wherever it does come from."

"Yes, we don't pretend to say that," Mrs. Tarrant murmured.

This little discussion had brought the blood to Olive's face; she felt that every one present was looking at her—Verena most of all—and that here was a chance to take a more complete possession of the girl. Such chances were agitating; moreover, she didn't like, on any occasion, to be so prominent. But everything that had been said was benighted and vulgar; the place seemed thick with the very atmosphere out of which she wished to lift Verena. They were treating her as a show, as a social resource, and the two young men from the College were laughing at her shamelessly. She was not meant for that, and Olive would save her. Verena was so simple, she couldn't see herself; she was the only pure spirit in the odious

group.

"I want you to address audiences that are worth addressing—to convince people who are serious and sincere." Olive herself, as she spoke, heard the great shake in her voice. "Your mission is not to exhibit yourself as a pastime for individuals, but to touch the heart of communities, of nations."

"Dear madam, I'm sure Miss Tarrant will touch my heart!" Mr. Burrage objected, gallantly.

"Well, I don't know but she judges you young men fairly," said Mrs. Tarrant, with a sigh.

Verena, diverted a moment from her communion with her friend, considered Mr. Burrage with a smile. "I don't believe you have got any heart, and I shouldn't care much if you had!"

"You have no idea how much the way you say that increases my desire to hear you speak."

"Do as you please, my dear," said Olive, almost inaudibly. "My carriage must be there—I must leave you, in any case."

"I can see you don't want it," said Verena, wondering. "You would stay if you liked it, wouldn't you?"

"I don't know what I should do. Come out with me!" Olive spoke almost with fierceness.

"Well, you'll send them away no better than they came," said Matthias Pardon.

"I guess you had better come round some other night," Selah suggested pacifically, but with a significance which fell upon Olive's ear.

Mr. Gracie seemed inclined to make the sturdiest protest. "Look here, Miss Tarrant; do you want to save Harvard College, or do you not?" he demanded, with a humorous frown.

"I didn't know *you* were Harvard College!" Verena returned as humorously.

"I am afraid you are rather disappointed in your evening if you expected to obtain some insight into our ideas," said Mrs. Tarrant, with an air of impotent sympathy, to Mr. Gracie.

"Well, good night, Miss Chancellor," she went on; "I hope you've got a warm wrap. I suppose you'll think we go a good deal by what you say in this house. Well, most people don't object to that. There's a little hole right there in the porch; it seems as if Doctor Tarrant couldn't remember to go for the man to fix it. I am afraid you'll think we're too much taken up with all these new hopes. Well, we *have* enjoyed seeing you in our home; it quite raises my appetite for social intercourse. Did you come out on wheels? I can't stand a sleigh myself; it makes me sick."

This was her hostess's response to Miss Chancellor's very summary farewell, uttered as the three ladies proceeded together to the door of the house. Olive had got herself out of the little parlor with a sort of blind, defiant dash; she had taken no perceptible leave of the rest of the company. When she was calm she had very good manners, but when she was agitated she was guilty of lapses, every one of which came back to her, magnified, in the watches of the night. Sometimes they excited remorse, and sometimes triumph; in the latter case she felt that she could not have been so justly vindictive in cold blood. Tarrant wished to guide her down the steps, out of the little yard, to her carriage; he reminded her that they had had ashes sprinkled on the planks on purpose. But she begged him to let her alone, she almost pushed him back; she drew Verena out into the dark freshness, closing the door of the house behind her. There was a splendid sky, all blue-black and silver—a sparkling wintry vault, where the stars were like a myriad points of ice. The air was silent and sharp, and the vague snow looked cruel. Olive knew now very definitely what the promise was that she wanted Verena to make; but it was too cold, she could keep her there bareheaded but an instant. Mrs. Tarrant, meanwhile, in the parlor, remarked that it seemed as if she couldn't trust Verena with her own parents; and Selah intimated that, with a proper invitation, his daughter would be very happy to address Harvard College at large. Mr. Burrage and Mr. Gracie said they would invite her on the spot, in the name of the University; and Matthias Pardon reflected (and asserted) with glee that this would be the newest thing yet. But he added that they would have a high time with Miss Chancellor first, and this was evidently the conviction of the company.

"I can see you are angry at something," Verena said to Olive, as the two stood there in the starlight. "I hope it isn't me. What have I done?"

"I am not angry—I am anxious. I am so afraid I shall lose you. Verena, don't fail me—don't fail me!" Olive spoke low, with a kind of passion.

"Fail you? How can I fail?"

"You can't, of course you can't. Your star is above you. But don't listen to *them."*

"To whom do you mean, Olive? To my parents?"

"Oh no, not your parents," Miss Chancellor replied, with some sharpness. She paused a moment, and then she said:"I don't care for your parents. I have told you that before; but now that I have seen them—as they wished, as you wished, and I didn't—I don't care for them; I must repeat it, Verena. I should be dishonest if I let you think I did."

"Why, Olive Chancellor!" Verena murmured, as if she were trying, in spite of the sadness produced by this declaration, to do justice to her friend's impartiality.

"Yes, I am hard; perhaps I am cruel; but we must be hard if we wish to triumph. Don't listen to young men when they try to mock and muddle you. They don't care for you; they don't care for *us.* They care only for their pleasure, for what they believe to be the right of the stronger. The stronger? I am not so sure!"

"Some of them care so much—are supposed to care too much—for us," Verena said, with a smile that looked dim in the darkness.

"Yes, if we will give up everything. I have asked you before—are you prepared to give up?"

"Do you mean, to give *you* up?"

"No, all our wretched sisters—all our hopes and purposes—all that we think sacred and worth living for!"

"Oh, they don't want that, Olive." Verena's smile became more distinct, and she added: "They don't want so much as that!"

"Well, then, go in and speak for them—and sing for them—and dance for them!"

"Olive, you are cruel!"

"Yes, I am. But promise me one thing, and I shall be—oh, so tender!"

"What a strange place for promises," said Verena, with a shiver, looking about her into the night.

"Yes, I am dreadful; I know it. But promise." And Olive drew the girl nearer to her, flinging over her with one hand the fold of a cloak that hung ample upon her own meager person, and holding her there with the other, while she looked at her, suppliant but half hesitating. "Promise!" she repeated.

"Is it something terrible?"

"Never to listen to one of them, never to be bribed "

At this moment the house door was opened again, and the light of the hall projected itself across the little piazza. Matthias Pardon stood in the aperture, and Tarrant and his wife, with the two other visitors, appeared to have come forward as well, to see what detained Verena.

"You seem to have started a kind of lecture out here," Mr. Pardon said. "You ladies had better look out, or you'll freeze together!"

Verena was reminded by her mother that she would catch her death, but she had already heard sharply, low as they were spoken, five last words from Olive, who now abruptly released her and passed swiftly over the path from the porch to her waiting carriage. Tarrant creaked along, in pursuit, to assist Miss Chancellor; the others drew Verena into the house. "Promise me not to marry!"—that was what echoed in her startled mind, and repeated itself there when Mr. Burrage returned to the charge, asking her if she wouldn't at least appoint some evening when they might listen to her. She knew that Olive's injunction ought not to have surprised her; she had already felt it in the air; she would have said at any time, if she had been asked, that she didn't suppose Miss Chancellor would want her to marry. But the idea, uttered as her friend had uttered it, had a new solemnity, and the effect of that quick, violent colloquy was to make her nervous and impatient, as if she had had a sudden glimpse of futurity. That was rather awful, even if it represented the fate one would like.

When the two young men from the College pressed their petition, she asked, with a laugh that surprised them, whether they wished to "mock and muddle" her. They went away, assenting to Mrs. Tarrant's last remark: "I am afraid you'll feel that you don't quite understand us yet." Matthias Pardon remained; her father and mother, expressing their perfect confidence that he would excuse them, went to bed and left him sitting there. He stayed a good while longer, nearly an hour, and said things that made Verena think that *he,* perhaps, would like to marry her. But while she listened to him, more abstractedly than her custom was, she remarked to herself that there could be no difficulty in promising Olive so far as he was concerned. He was very pleasant, and he knew an immense deal about everything, or, rather, about everyone, and he would take her right into the midst of life. But she didn't wish to marry him, all the same, and after he had gone she reflected that, once she came to think of it, she didn't want to marry anyone. So it would be easy, after all, to make Olive that promise, and it would give her so much pleasure!

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The next time Verena saw Olive, she said to her that she was ready to make the promise she had asked the other night; but, to her great surprise, this young woman answered her by a question intended to check such rashness. Miss Chancellor raised a warning finger; she had an air of dissuasion almost as solemn as her former pressure; her passionate impatience appeared to have given way to other considerations, to be replaced by the resignation that comes with deeper reflection. It was tinged in this case, indeed, by such bitterness as might be permitted to a young lady who cultivated the brightness of a great faith.

"Don't you want any promise at present?" Verena asked. "Why, Olive, how you change!"

"My dear child, you are so young—so strangely young. I am a thousand years old; I have lived through generations —through centuries. I know what I know by experience; you know it by imagination. That is consistent with your being the fresh, bright creature that you are. I am constantly forgetting the difference between us—that you are a mere child as yet, though a child destined for great things. I forgot it the other night, but I have remembered it since. You must pass through a certain phase, and it would be very wrong in me to pretend to suppress it. That is all clear to me now; I see it was my jealousy that spoke—my restless, hungry jealousy. I have far too much of that; I oughtn't to give anyone the right to say that it's a woman's quality. I don't want your signature; I only want your confidence—only what springs from that. I hope with all my soul that you won't marry; but if you don't it must not be because you have promised me. You know what I think—that there is something noble done when one makes a sacrifice for a great good. Priests—when they were real priests—never married, and what you and I dream of doing demands of us a kind of priesthood. It seems to me very poor, when friendship and faith and charity and the most interesting occupation in the world—when such a combination as this doesn't seem, by itself, enough to live for. No man that I have ever seen cares a straw in his heart for what we are trying to accomplish. They hate it; they scorn it; they will try to stamp it out whenever they can. Oh yes, I know there are men who pretend to care for it; but they are not really men, and I wouldn't be sure even of them! Any man that one would look at—with him, as a matter of course, it is war upon us to the knife. I don't mean to say there are not some male beings who are willing to patronize us a little; to pat us on the back and recommend a few moderate concessions; to say that there *are* two or three little points in which society has not been quite just to us. But any man who pretends to accept our program *in toto,* as you and I understand it, of his own free will, before he is forced to—such a person simply schemes to betray us. There are gentlemen in plenty who would be glad to stop your mouth by kissing you! If you become dangerous some day to their selfishness, to their vested interests, to their immorality—as I pray heaven every day, my dear friend, that you may!—it will be a grand thing for one of them if he can persuade you that he loves you. Then you will see what he will do with you, and how far his love will take him! It would be a sad day for you and for me and for all of us, if you were to believe something of that kind. You see I am very calm now; I have thought it all out."

Verena had listened with earnest eyes. "Why, Olive, you are quite a speaker yourself!" she exclaimed. "You would far surpass me if you would let yourself go."

Miss Chancellor shook her head with a melancholy that was not devoid of sweetness. "I can speak to *you;* but that is no proof. The very stones of the street—all the dumb things of nature—might find a voice to talk to you. I have no facility; I am awkward and embarrassed and dry." When this young lady, after a struggle with the winds and waves of emotion, emerged into the quiet stream of a certain high reasonableness, she presented her most graceful aspect; she had a tone of softness and sympathy, a gentle dignity, a serenity of wisdom, which sealed the appreciation of those who knew her well enough to like her, and which always impressed Verena as something almost august. Such moods, however, were not often revealed to the public at large; they belonged to Miss Chancellor's very private life. One of them had possession of her at present, and she went on to explain the inconsequence which had puzzled her friend with the same quiet clearness, the detachment from error, of a woman whose self-scrutiny has been as sharp as her deflection.

"Don't think me capricious if I say I would rather trust you without a pledge. I owe you, I owe every one, an apology for my rudeness and fierceness at your mother's. It came over me—just seeing those young men—how exposed you are; and the idea made me (for the moment) frantic. I see your danger still, but I see other things too, and I have recovered my balance. You must be safe, Verena—you must be saved; but your safety must not come from your having tied your hands. It must come from the growth of your perception; from your seeing things, of yourself, sincerely and with conviction, in the light in which I see them; from your feeling that for your work your freedom is essential, and that there is no freedom for

you and me save in religiously *not* doing what you will often be asked to do—and I never!" Miss Chancellor brought out these last words with a proud jerk which was not without its pathos. "Don't promise, don't promise!" she went on. "I would far rather you didn't. But don't fail me—don't fail me, or I shall die!"

Her manner of repairing her inconsistency was altogether feminine: she wished to extract a certainty at the same time that she wished to deprecate a pledge, and she would have been delighted to put Verena into the enjoyment of that freedom which was so important for her by preventing her exercising it in a particular direction. The girl was now completely under her influence; she had latent curiosities and distractions—left to herself, she was not always thinking of the unhappiness of women; but the touch of Olive's tone worked a spell, and she found something to which at least a portion of her nature turned with eagerness in her companion's wider knowledge, her elevation of view. Miss Chancellor was historic and philosophic; or, at any rate, she appeared so to Verena, who felt that through such an association one might at last intellectually command all life. And there was a simpler impulse; Verena wished to please her if only because she had such a dread of displeasing her. Olive's displeasures, disappointments, disapprovals were tragic, truly memorable; she grew white under them, not shedding many tears, as a general thing, like inferior women (she cried when she was angry, not when she was hurt), but limping and panting, morally, as if she had received a wound that she would carry for life. On the other hand, her commendations, her satisfactions were as soft as a west wind; and she had this sign, the rarest of all, of generosity, that she liked obligations of gratitude when they were not laid upon her by men. Then, indeed, she scarcely recognized them. She considered men in general as so much in the debt of the opposite sex that any individual woman had an unlimited credit with them; she could not possibly overdraw the general feminine account. The unexpected temperance of her speech on this subject of Verena's accessibility to matrimonial error seemed to the girl to have an antique beauty, a wisdom purged of worldly elements; it reminded her of qualities that she believed to have been proper to Electra or Antigone. This made her wish the more to do something that would gratify Olive; and in spite of her friend's dissuasion she declared that she should like to promise. "I will promise, at any rate, not to marry any of those gentlemen that were at the house," she said. "Those seemed to be the ones you were principally afraid of."

"You will promise not to marry anyone you don't like," said Olive. "That would be a great comfort!"

"But I do like Mr. Burrage and Mr. Gracie."

"And Mr. Matthias Pardon? What a name!"

"Well, he knows how to make himself agreeable. He can tell you everything you want to know."

"You mean everything you don't! Well, if you like everyone, I haven't the least objection. It would only be preferences that I should find alarming. I am not the least afraid of your marrying a repulsive man; your danger would come from an attractive one."

"I'm glad to hear you admit that some *are* attractive!" Verena exclaimed, with the light laugh which her reverence for Miss Chancellor had not yet quenched. "It sometimes seems as if there weren't any you could like!"

"I can imagine a man I should like very much," Olive replied, after a moment. "But I don't like those I see. They seem to me poor creatures." And, indeed, her uppermost feeling in regard to them was a kind of cold scorn; she thought most of them palterers and bullies. The end of the colloquy was that Verena, having assented, with her usual docility, to her companion's optimistic contention that it was a "phase," this taste for evening calls from collegians and newspapermen, and would consequently pass away with the growth of her mind, remarked that the injustice of men might be an accident or might be a part of their nature, but at any rate she should have to change a good deal before she should want to marry.

About the middle of December, Miss Chancellor received a visit from Matthias Pardon, who had come to ask her what she meant to do about Verena. She had never invited him to call upon her, and the appearance of a gentleman whose desire to see her was so irrepressible as to dispense with such a preliminary was not in her career an accident frequent enough to have taught her equanimity. She thought Mr. Pardon's visit a liberty; but, if she expected to convey this idea to him by withholding any suggestion that he should sit down, she was greatly mistaken, inasmuch as he cut the ground from under her feet by himself offering her a chair. His manner represented hospitality enough for both of them, and she was obliged to listen, on the edge of her sofa (she could at least seat herself where she liked), to his extraordinary inquiry. Of course she was not obliged to answer it, and indeed she scarcely understood it. He explained that it was prompted by the intense interest he felt in Miss Verena; but that scarcely made it more comprehensible, such a sentiment (on his part) being such a curious mixture. He had a sort of enamel of good humor which showed that his indelicacy was his profession; and he asked for revelations of the *vie intime* of his victims with the bland confidence of a fashionable physician inquiring about symptoms. He wanted to know what Miss Chancellor meant to do, because if she didn't mean to do anything, he had an idea—which he wouldn't conceal from her—of going into the enterprise himself. "You see, what I should like to know is this: do you consider that she belongs to you, or that she belongs to the people? If she belongs to you, why don't you bring her out?"

He had no purpose and no consciousness of being impertinent; he only wished to talk over the matter sociably with Miss Chancellor. He knew, of course, that there was a presumption she would not be sociable, but no presumption had yet deterred him from presenting a surface which he believed to be polished till it shone; there was always a larger one in favor of his power to penetrate and of the majesty of the "great dailies." Indeed, he took so many things for granted that Olive remained dumb while she regarded them; and he availed himself of what he considered as a fortunate opening to be really very frank. He reminded her that he had known Miss Verena a good deal longer than she; he had traveled out to Cambridge the other winter (when he could get an off-night), with the thermometer at ten below zero. He had always thought her attractive, but it wasn't till this season that his eyes had been fully opened. Her talent had matured, and now he had no hesitation in calling her brilliant. Miss Chancellor could imagine whether, as an old friend, he could watch such a beautiful unfolding with indifference. She would fascinate the people, just as she had fascinated her (Miss Chancellor), and, he might be permitted to add, himself. The fact was, she was a great card, and some one ought to play it. There never had been a more attractive female speaker before the American public; she would walk right past Mrs. Farrinder, and Mrs. Farrinder knew it. There was room for both, no doubt, they had such a different style; anyhow, what he wanted to show was that there was room for Miss Verena. She didn't want any more tuning-up, she wanted to break right out. Moreover, he felt that any gentleman who should lead her to success would win her esteem; he might even attract her more powerfully—who could tell? If Miss Chancellor wanted to attach her permanently, she ought to push her right forward. He gathered from what Miss Verena had told him that she wanted to make her study up the subject a while longer—follow some kind of course. Well, now, he could assure her that there was no preparation so good as just seeing a couple of thousand people down there before you who have paid their money to have you tell them something. Miss Verena was a natural genius, and he hoped very much she wasn't going to take the nature out of her. She could study up as she went along; she had got the great thing that you couldn't learn, a kind of divine afflatus, as the ancients used to say, and she had better just begin on that. He wouldn't deny what was the matter with *him;* he was quite under the spell, and his admiration made him want to see her where she belonged. He shouldn't care so much how she got there, but it would certainly add to his pleasure if he could show her up to her place. Therefore, would Miss Chancellor just tell him this: How long did she expect to hold her back; how long did she expect a humble admirer to wait? Of course he hadn't come there to cross-question her; there was one thing he trusted he always kept clear of; when he was indiscreet he wanted to know it. He had come with a proposal of his own, and he hoped it would seem a sufficient warrant for his visit. Would Miss Chancellor be willing to divide a—the—well, he might call it the responsibilities? Couldn't they run Miss Verena together? In this case, every one would be satisfied. She could travel round with her as her companion, and he would see that the American people walked up. If Miss Chancellor would just let her go a little, he would look after the rest. He wanted no odds; he only wanted her for about an hour and a half three or four evenings a week.

Olive had time, in the course of this appeal, to make her faculties converge, to ask herself what she could say to this prodigious young man that would make him feel as how base a thing she held his proposal that they should constitute themselves into a company for drawing profit from Verena. Unfortunately, the most sarcastic inquiry that could occur to her as a response was also the most obvious one, so that he hesitated but a moment with his rejoinder after she had asked him how many thousands of dollars he expected to make.

"For Miss Verena? It depends upon the time. She'd run for ten years, at least. I can't figure it up till all the States have been heard from," he said, smiling.

"I don't mean for Miss Tarrant, I mean for you," Olive returned, with the impression that she was looking him straight in the eye.

"Oh, as many as you'll leave me!" Matthias Pardon answered, with a laugh that contained all, and more than all, the jocularity of the American press. "To speak seriously," he added, "I don't want to make money out of it."

"What do you want to make, then?"

"Well, I want to make history! I want to help the ladies."

"The ladies?" Olive murmured. "What do you know about ladies?" she was on the point of adding, when his promptness checked her.

"All over the world. I want to work for their emancipation. I regard it as the great modern question."

Miss Chancellor got up now; this was rather too strong. Whether, eventually, she was successful in what she attempted, the reader of her history will judge; but at this moment she had not that promise of success which resides in a willingness to make use of every aid that offers. Such is the penalty of being of a fastidious, exclusive, uncompromising nature; of seeing things not simply and sharply, but in perverse relations, in interwisted strands. It seemed to our young lady that nothing could be less attractive than to owe her emancipation to such a one as Matthias Pardon; and it is curious that those qualities which he had in common with Verena, and which in her seemed to Olive romantic and touching—her having sprung from the "people," had an acquaintance with poverty, a hand-to-mouth development, and an experience of

the seamy side of life—availed in no degree to conciliate Miss Chancellor. I suppose it was because he was a man. She told him that she was much obliged to him for his offer, but that he evidently didn't understand Verena and herself. No, not even Miss Tarrant, in spite of his long acquaintance with her. They had no desire to be notorious; they only wanted to be useful. They had no wish to make money; there would always be plenty of money for Miss Tarrant. Certainly, she should come before the public, and the world would acclaim her and hang upon her words; but crude, precipitate action was what both of them least desired. The change in the dreadful position of women was not a question for today simply, or for tomorrow, but for many years to come; and there would be a great deal to think of, to map out. One thing they were determined upon—that men shouldn't taunt them with being superficial. When Verena should appear it would be armed at all points, like Joan of Arc (this analogy had lodged itself in Olive's imagination); she should have facts and figures; she should meet men on their own ground. "What we mean to do, we mean to do well," Miss Chancellor said to her visitor, with considerable sternness; leaving him to make such an application to himself as his fancy might suggest.

This announcement had little comfort for him; he felt baffled and disheartened—indeed, quite sick. Was it not sickening to hear her talk of this dreary process of preparation?—as if any one cared about that, and would know whether Verena were prepared or not! Had Miss Chancellor no faith in her girlhood? didn't she know what a card that would be? This was the last inquiry Olive allowed him the opportunity of making. She remarked to him that they might talk for ever without coming to an agreement—their points of view were so far apart. Besides, it was a woman's question; what they wanted was for women, and it should be by women. It had happened to the young Matthias more than once to be shown the way to the door, but the path of retreat had never yet seemed to him so unpleasant. He was naturally amiable, but it had not hitherto befallen him to be made to feel that he was not—and could not be—a factor in contemporary history: here was a rapacious woman who proposed to keep that favorable setting for herself. He let her know that she was right-down selfish, and that if she chose to sacrifice a beautiful nature to her antediluvian theories and love of power, a vigilant daily press—whose business it was to expose wrongdoing—would demand an account from her. She replied that, if the newspapers chose to insult her, that was their own affair; one outrage the more to the sex in her person was of little account. And after he had left her she seemed to see the glow of dawning success; the battle had begun, and something of the ecstasy of the martyr.

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Verena told her, a week after this, that Mr. Pardon wanted so much she should say she would marry him; and she added, with evident pleasure at being able to give her so agreeable a piece of news, that she had declined to say anything of the sort. She thought that now, at least, Olive must believe in her; for the proposal was more attractive than Miss Chancellor seemed able to understand. "He does place things in a very seductive light," Verena said; "he says that if I become his wife I shall be carried straight along by a force of excitement of which at present I have no idea. I shall wake up famous, if I marry him; I have only got to give out my feelings, and he will take care of the rest. He says every hour of my youth is precious to me, and that we should have a lovely time traveling round the country. I think you ought to allow that all that is rather dazzling—for I am not naturally concentrated, like you!"

"He promises you success. What do you call success?" Olive inquired, looking at her friend with a kind of salutary coldness—a suspension of sympathy—with which Verena was now familiar (though she liked it no better than at first), and which made approbation more gracious when approbation came.

Verena reflected a moment, and then answered, smiling, but with confidence: "Producing a pressure that shall be irresistible. Causing certain laws to be repealed by Congress and by the State legislatures, and others to be enacted." She repeated the words as if they had been part of a catechism committed to memory, while Olive saw that this mechanical tone was in the nature of a joke that she could not deny herself; they had had that definition so often before, and Miss Chancellor had had occasion so often to remind her what success *really* was. Of course it was easy to prove to her now that Mr. Pardon's glittering bait was a very different thing; was a mere trap and lure, a bribe to vanity and impatience, a device for making her give herself away—let alone fill his pockets while she did so. Olive was conscious enough of the girl's want of continuity; she had seen before how she could be passionately serious at times, and then perversely, even if innocently, trivial—as just now, when she seemed to wish to convert one of their most sacred formulas into a pleasantry. She had already quite recognized, however, that it was not of importance that Verena should be just like herself; she was all of one piece, and Verena was of many pieces, which had, where they fitted together, little capricious chinks, through which mocking inner lights seemed sometimes to gleam. It was a part of Verena's being unlike her that she should feel Mr. Pardon's promise of eternal excitement to be a brilliant thing, should indeed consider Mr. Pardon with any tolerance at all. But Olive tried afresh to allow for such aberrations, as a phase of youth and suburban culture; the more so that, even when she tried most, Verena reproached her—so far as Verena's incurable softness could reproach—with not allowing enough. Olive didn't appear to understand that, while Matthias Pardon drew that picture and tried to hold her hand (this image was unfortunate), she had given one long, fixed, wistful look, through the door he opened, at the bright tumult of the world, and then had turned away, solely for her friend's sake, to an austerer probation and a purer effort; solely for her friend's, that is, and that of the whole enslaved sisterhood. The fact remained, at any rate, that Verena had made a sacrifice; and this thought, after a while, gave Olive a greater sense of security. It seemed almost to seal the future; for Olive knew that the young interviewer would not easily be shaken off, and yet she was sure that Verena would never yield to him.

It was true that at present Mr. Burrage came a great deal to the little house at Cambridge; Verena told her about that, told her so much that it was almost as good as if she had told her all. He came without Mr. Gracie now; he could find his way alone, and he seemed to wish that there should be no one else. He had made himself so pleasant to her mother that she almost always went out of the room; that was the highest proof Mrs. Tarrant could give of her appreciation of a "gentleman-caller." They knew everything about him by this time; that his father was dead, his mother very fashionable and prominent, and he himself in possession of a handsome patrimony. They thought ever so much of him in New York. He collected beautiful things, pictures and antiques and objects that he sent for to Europe on purpose, many of which were arranged in his rooms at Cambridge. He had intaglios and Spanish altar-cloths and drawings by the old masters. He was different from most others; he seemed to want so much to enjoy life, and to think you easily could if you would only let yourself go. Of course—judging by what *he* had—he appeared to think you required a great many things to keep you up. And then Verena told Olive—she could see it was after a little delay —that he wanted her to come round to his place and see his treasures. He wanted to show them to her, he was so sure she would admire them. Verena was sure also, but she wouldn't go alone, and she wanted Olive to go with her. They would have tea, and there would be other ladies, and Olive would tell her what she thought of a life that was so crowded with beauty. Miss Chancellor made her reflections on all this, and the first of them was that it was happy for her that she had determined for the present to

accept these accidents, for otherwise might she not now have had a deeper alarm? She wished to heaven that conceited young men with time on their hands would leave Verena alone; but evidently they wouldn't, and her best safety was in seeing as many as should turn up. If the type should become frequent, she would very soon judge it. If Olive had not been so grim, she would have had a smile to spare for the frankness with which the girl herself adopted this theory. She was eager to explain that Mr. Burrage didn't seem at all to want what poor Mr. Pardon had wanted; he made her talk about her views far more than that gentleman, but gave no sign of offering himself either as a husband or as a lecture-agent. The furthest he had gone as yet was to tell her that he liked her for the same reason that he liked old enamels and old embroideries; and when she said that she didn't see how she resembled such things, he had replied that it was because she was so peculiar and so delicate. She might be peculiar, but she had protested against the idea that she was delicate; it was the last thing that she wanted to be thought; and Olive could see from this how far she was from falling in with everything he said. When Miss Chancellor asked if she respected Mr. Burrage (and how solemn Olive could make that word she by this time knew), she answered, with her sweet, vain laugh, but apparently with perfect good faith, that it didn't matter whether she did or not, for what was the whole thing but simply a phase—the very one they had talked about? The sooner she got through it the better, was it not?—and she seemed to think that her transit would be materially quickened by a visit to Mr. Burrage's rooms. As I say, Verena was pleased to regard the phase as quite inevitable, and she had said more than once to Olive that if their struggle was to be with men, the more they knew about them the better. Miss Chancellor asked her why her mother should not go with her to see the curiosities, since she mentioned that their possessor had not neglected to invite Mrs. Tarrant; and Verena said that this, of course, would be very simple—only her mother wouldn't be able to tell her so well as Olive whether she ought to respect Mr. Burrage. This decision as to whether Mr. Burrage should be respected assumed in the life of these two remarkable young women, pitched in so high a moral key, the proportions of a momentous event. Olive shrank at first from facing it—not, indeed, the decision—for we know that her own mind had long since been made up in regard to the quantity of esteem due to almost any member of the other sex—but the incident itself, which, if Mr. Burrage should exasperate her further, might expose her to the danger of appearing to Verena to be unfair to him. It was her belief that he was playing a deeper game than the young Matthias, and she was very willing to watch him; but she thought it prudent not to attempt to cut short the phase (she adopted that classification) prematurely—an imputation she should incur if, without more delay, she were to "shut down," as Verena said, on the young connoisseur.

It was settled, therefore, that Mrs. Tarrant should, with her daughter, accept Mr. Burrage's invitation; and in a few days these ladies paid a visit to his apartments. Verena subsequently, of course, had much to say about it, but she dilated even more upon her mother's impressions than upon her own. Mrs. Tarrant had carried away a supply which would last her all winter; there had been some New York ladies present who were "on" at that moment, and with whom her intercourse was rich in emotions. She had told them all that she should be happy to see them in her home, but they had not yet picked their way along the little planks of the front yard. Mr. Burrage, at all events, had been quite lovely, and had talked about his collections, which were wonderful, in the most interesting manner. Verena inclined to think he was to be respected. He admitted that he was not really studying law at all; he had only come to Cambridge for the form; but she didn't see why it wasn't enough when you made yourself as pleasant as that. She went so far as to ask Olive whether taste and art were not something, and her friend could see that she was certainly very much involved in the phase. Miss Chancellor, of course, had her answer ready. Taste and art were good when they enlarged the mind, not when they narrowed it. Verena assented to this, and said it remained to be seen what effect they had had upon Mr. Burrage—a remark which led Olive to fear that at such a rate much would remain, especially when Verena told her, later, that another visit to the young man's rooms was projected, and that this time she must come, he having expressed the greatest desire for the honor, and her own wish being greater still that they should look at some of his beautiful things together.

A day or two after this, Mr. Henry Burrage left a card at Miss Chancellor's door, with a note in which he expressed the hope that she would take tea with him on a certain day on which he expected the company of his mother. Olive responded to this invitation, in conjunction with Verena; but in doing so she was in the position, singular for her, of not quite understanding what she was about. It seemed to her strange that Verena should urge her to take such a step when she was free to go without her, and it proved two things: first, that she was much interested in Mr. Henry Burrage, and second, that her nature was extraordinarily beautiful. Could anything, in effect, be less underhand than such an indifference to what she supposed to be the best opportunities for carrying on a flirtation? Verena wanted to know the truth, and it was clear that by this time she believed Olive Chancellor to have it, for the most part, in her keeping. Her insistence, therefore, proved, above all, that she cared more for her friend's opinion of Henry Burrage than for her own—a reminder, certainly, of the responsibility that Olive had incurred in undertaking to form this generous young mind, and of the exalted place that she now occupied in it. Such revelations ought to have been satisfactory; if they failed to be completely so, it was only on account of the elder girl's regret that the subject as to which her judgment was wanted should be a young man

destitute of the worst vices. Henry Burrage had contributed to throw Miss Chancellor into a "state," as these young ladies called it, the night she met him at Mrs. Tarrant's; but it had none the less been conveyed to Olive by the voices of the air that he was a gentleman and a good fellow.

This was painfully obvious when the visit to his rooms took place; he was so good-humored, so amusing, so friendly and considerate, so attentive to Miss Chancellor, he did the honors of his bachelor-nest with so easy a grace, that Olive, part of the time, sat dumbly shaking her conscience, like a watch that wouldn't go, to make it tell her some better reason why she shouldn't like him. She saw that there would be no difficulty in disliking his mother; but that, unfortunately, would not serve her purpose nearly so well. Mrs. Burrage had come to spend a few days near her son; she was staying at an hotel in Boston. It presented itself to Olive that after this entertainment it would be an act of courtesy to call upon her; but here, at least, was the comfort that she could cover herself with the general absolution extended to the Boston temperament and leave her alone. It was slightly provoking, indeed, that Mrs. Burrage should have so much the air of a New Yorker who didn't particularly notice whether a Bostonian called or not; but there is ever an imperfection, I suppose, in even the sweetest revenge. She was a woman of society, large and voluminous, fair (in complexion) and regularly ugly, looking as if she ought to be slow and rather heavy, but disappointing this expectation by a quick, amused utterance, a short, bright, summary laugh, with which she appeared to dispose of the joke (whatever it was) forever, and an air of recognizing on the instant everything she saw and heard. She was evidently accustomed to talk, and even to listen, if not kept waiting too long for details and parentheses; she was not continuous, but frequent, as it were, and you could see that she hated explanations, though it was not to be supposed that she had anything to fear from them. Her favors were general, not particular; she was civil enough to everyone, but not in any case endearing, and perfectly genial without being confiding, as people were in Boston when (in moments of exaltation) they wished to mark that they were not suspicious. There was something in her whole manner which seemed to say to Olive that she belonged to a larger world than hers; and our young lady was vexed at not hearing that she had lived for a good many years in Europe, as this would have made it easy to classify her as one of the corrupt. She learned, almost with a sense of injury, that neither the mother nor the son had been longer beyond the seas than she herself; and if they were to be judged as triflers they must be dealt with individually. Was it an aid to such a judgment to see that Mrs. Burrage was very much pleased with Boston, with Harvard College, with her son's interior, with her cup of tea (it was old Sèvres), which was not half so bad as she had expected, with the company he had asked to meet her (there were three or four gentlemen, one of whom was Mr. Gracie), and, last, not least, with Verena Tarrant, whom she addressed as a celebrity, kindly, cleverly, but without maternal tenderness or anything to mark the difference in their age? She spoke to her as if they were equals in that respect, as if Verena's genius and fame would make up the disparity, and the girl had no need of encouragement and patronage. She made no direct allusion, however, to her particular views, and asked her no question about her "gift"—an omission which Verena thought strange, and, with the most speculative candor, spoke of to Olive afterwards. Mrs. Burrage seemed to imply that every one present had some distinction and some talent, that they were all good company together. There was nothing in her manner to indicate that she was afraid of Verena on her son's account; she didn't resemble a person who would like him to marry the daughter of a mesmeric healer, and yet she appeared to think it charming that he should have such a young woman there to give gusto to her hour at Cambridge. Poor Olive was, in the nature of things, entangled in contradictions; she had a horror of the idea of Verena's marrying Mr. Burrage, and yet she was angry when his mother demeaned herself as if the little girl with red hair, whose freshness she enjoyed, could not be a serious danger. She saw all this through the blur of her shyness, the conscious, anxious silence to which she was so much of the time condemned. It may therefore be imagined how sharp her vision would have been could she only have taken the situation more simply; for she was intelligent enough not to have needed to be morbid, even for purposes of self-defense.

I must add, however, that there was a moment when she came near being happy—or, at any rate, reflected that it was a pity she could not be so. Mrs. Burrage asked her son to play "some little thing," and he sat down to his piano and revealed a talent that might well have gratified that lady's pride. Olive was extremely susceptible to music, and it was impossible to her not to be soothed and beguiled by the young man's charming art. One "little thing" succeeded another; his selections were all very happy. His guests sat scattered in the red firelight, listening, silent, in comfortable attitudes; there was a faint fragrance from the burning logs, which mingled with the perfume of Schubert and Mendelssohn; the covered lamps made a glow here and there, and the cabinets and brackets produced brown shadows, out of which some precious object gleamed—some ivory carving or cinque-cento cup. It was given to Olive, under these circumstances, for half an hour, to surrender herself, to enjoy the music, to admit that Mr. Burrage played with exquisite taste, to feel as if the situation were a kind of truce. Her nerves were calmed, her problems—for the time—subsided. Civilization, under such an influence, in such a setting, appeared to have done its work; harmony ruled the scene; human life ceased to be a battle. She went so far as to ask herself why one should have a quarrel with it; the relations of men and women, in that picturesque grouping, had not the air of being internecine. In short, she had an interval of unexpected rest, during which she kept her eyes

mainly on Verena, who sat near Mrs. Burrage, letting herself go, evidently, more completely than Olive. To her, too, music was a delight, and her listening face turned itself to different parts of the room, unconsciously, while her eyes vaguely rested on the *bibelots* that emerged into the firelight. At moments Mrs. Burrage bent her countenance upon her and smiled, at random, kindly; and then Verena smiled back, while her expression seemed to say that, oh yes, she was giving up everything, all principles, all projects. Even before it was time to go, Olive felt that they were both (Verena and she) quite demoralized, and she only summoned energy to take her companion away when she heard Mrs. Burrage propose to her to come and spend a fortnight in New York. Then Olive exclaimed to herself, "Is it a plot? Why in the world can't they let her alone?" and prepared to throw a fold of her mantle, as she had done before, over her young friend. Verena answered, somewhat impetuously, that she should be delighted to visit Mrs. Burrage; then checked her impetuosity, after a glance from Olive, by adding that perhaps this lady wouldn't ask her if she knew what strong ground she took on the emancipation of women. Mrs. Burrage looked at her son and laughed; she said she was perfectly aware of Verena's views, and that it was impossible to be more in sympathy with them than she herself. She took the greatest interest in the emancipation of women; she thought there was so much to be done. These were the only remarks that passed in reference to the great subject; and nothing more was said to Verena, either by Henry Burrage or by his friend Gracie, about her addressing the Harvard students. Verena had told her father that Olive had put her veto upon that, and Tarrant had said to the young men that it seemed as if Miss Chancellor was going to put the thing through in her own way. We know that he thought this way very circuitous; but Miss Chancellor made him feel that she was in earnest, and that idea frightened the resistance out of him—it had such terrible associations. The people he had ever seen who were most in earnest were a committee of gentlemen who had investigated the phenomena of the "materialization" of spirits, some ten years before, and had bent the fierce light of the scientific method upon him. To Olive it appeared that Mr. Burrage and Mr. Gracie had ceased to be jocular; but that did not make them any less cynical. Henry Burrage said to Verena, as she was going, that he hoped she would think seriously of his mother's invitation; and she replied that she didn't know whether she should have much time in the future to give to people who already approved of her views: she expected to have her hands full with the others, who didn't.

"Does your scheme of work exclude all distraction, all recreation, then?" the young man inquired; and his look expressed real suspense.

Verena referred the matter, as usual, with her air of bright, ungrudging deference, to her companion. "Does it, should you say—our scheme of work?"

"I am afraid the distraction we have had this afternoon must last us for a long time," Olive said, without harshness, but with considerable majesty.

"Well, now, *is* he to be respected?" Verena demanded, as the two young women took their way through the early darkness, pacing quietly side by side, in their winter robes, like women consecrated to some holy office.

Olive turned it over a moment. "Yes, very much—as a pianist!"

Verena went into town with her in the horsecar—she was staying in Charles Street for a few days—and that evening she startled Olive by breaking out into a reflection very similar to the whimsical falterings of which she herself had been conscious while they sat in Mr. Burrage's pretty rooms, but against which she had now violently reacted.

"It would be very nice to do that always—just to take men as they are, and not to have to think about their badness. It would be very nice not to have so many questions, but to think they were all comfortably answered, so that one could sit there on an old Spanish leather chair, with the curtains drawn and keeping out the cold, the darkness, all the big, terrible, cruel world—sit there and listen for ever to Schubert and Mendelssohn. *They* didn't care anything about female suffrage! And I didn't feel the want of a vote today at all, did you?" Verena inquired, ending, as she always ended in these few speculations, with an appeal to Olive.

This young lady thought it necessary to give her a very firm answer. "I always feel it—everywhere—night and day. I feel it *here";* and Olive laid her hand solemnly on her heart. "I feel it as a deep, unforgettable wrong; I feel it as one feels a stain that is on one's honor."

Verena gave a clear laugh, and after that a soft sigh, and then said, "Do you know, Olive, I sometimes wonder whether, if it wasn't for you, I should feel it so very much!"

"My own friend," Olive replied, "you have never yet said anything to me which expressed so clearly the closeness and sanctity of our union."

"You do keep me up," Verena went on. "You are my conscience."

"I should like to be able to say that you are my form—my envelope. But you are too beautiful for that!" So Olive returned her friend's compliment; and later she said that, of course, it would be far easier to give up everything and draw the curtains to and pass one's life in an artificial atmosphere, with rose-colored lamps. It would be far easier to abandon the struggle, to leave all the unhappy women of the world to their immemorial misery, to lay down one's burden, close one's eyes to the whole dark picture, and, in short, simply expire. To this Verena objected that it would not be easy for her to expire at all; that such an

idea was darker than anything the world contained; that she had not done with life yet, and that she didn't mean to allow her responsibilities to crush her. And then the two young women concluded, as they had concluded before, by finding themselves completely, inspiringly in agreement, full of the purpose to live indeed, and with high success; to become great, in order not to be obscure, and powerful, in order not to be useless. Olive had often declared before that her conception of life was as something sublime or as nothing at all. The world was full of evil, but she was glad to have been born before it had been swept away, while it was still there to face, to give one a task and a reward. When the great reforms should be consummated, when the day of justice should have dawned, would not life perhaps be rather poor and pale? She had never pretended to deny that the hope of fame, of the very highest distinction, was one of her strongest incitements; and she held that the most effective way of protesting against the state of bondage of women was for an individual member of the sex to become illustrious. A person who might have overheard some of the talk of this possibly infatuated pair would have been touched by their extreme familiarity with the idea of earthly glory. Verena had not invented it, but she had taken it eagerly from her friend, and she returned it with interest. To Olive it appeared that just this partnership of their two minds —each of them, by itself, lacking an important group of facets—made an organic whole which, for the work in hand, could not fail to be brilliantly effective. Verena was often far more irresponsive than she liked to see her; but the happy thing in her composition was that, after a short contact with the divine idea —Olive was always trying to flash it at her, like a jewel in an uncovered case—she kindled, flamed up, took the words from her friend's less persuasive lips, resolved herself into a magical voice, became again the pure young sibyl. Then Olive perceived how fatally, without Verena's tender notes, her crusade would lack sweetness, what the Catholics call unction; and, on the other hand, how weak Verena would be on the statistical and logical side if she herself should not bring up the rear. Together, in short, they would be complete, they would have everything, and together they would triumph.

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This idea of their triumph, a triumph as yet ultimate and remote, but preceded by the solemn vista of an effort so religious as never to be wanting in ecstasy, became tremendously familiar to the two friends, but especially to Olive, during the winter of 187-, a season which ushered in the most momentous period of Miss Chancellor's life. About Christmas a step was taken which advanced her affairs immensely, and put them, to her apprehension, on a regular footing. This consisted in Verena's coming in to Charles Street to stay with her, in pursuance of an arrangement on Olive's part with Selah Tarrant and his wife that she should remain for many months. The coast was now perfectly clear. Mrs. Farrinder had started on her annual grand tour; she was rousing the people, from Maine to Texas; Matthias Pardon (it was to be supposed) had received, temporarily at least, his quietus; and Mrs. Luna was established in New York, where she had taken a house for a year, and whence she wrote to her sister that she was going to engage Basil Ransom (with whom she was in communication for this purpose) to do her law business. Olive wondered what law business Adeline could have, and hoped she would get into a pickle with her landlord or her milliner, so that repeated interviews with Mr. Ransom might become necessary. Mrs. Luna let her know very soon that these interviews had begun; the young Mississippian had come to dine with her; he hadn't got started much, by what she could make out, and she was even afraid that he didn't dine every day. But he wore a tall hat now, like a Northern gentleman, and Adeline intimated that she found him really attractive. He had been very nice to Newton, told him all about the war (quite the Southern version, of course, but Mrs. Luna didn't care anything about American politics, and she wanted her son to know all sides), and Newton did nothing but talk about him, calling him "Rannie," and imitating his pronunciation of certain words. Adeline subsequently wrote that she had made up her mind to put her affairs into his hands (Olive sighed, not unmagnanimously, as she thought of her sister's "affairs"), and later still she mentioned that she was thinking strongly of taking him to be Newton's tutor. She wished this interesting child to be privately educated, and it would be more agreeable to have in that relation a person who was already, as it were, a member of the family. Mrs. Luna wrote as if he were prepared to give up his profession to take charge of her son, and Olive was pretty sure that this was only a part of her grandeur, of the habit she had contracted, especially since living in Europe, of speaking as if in every case she required special arrangements.

In spite of the difference in their age, Olive had long since judged her, and made up her mind that Adeline lacked every quality that a person needed to be interesting in her eyes. She was rich (or sufficiently so), she was conventional and timid, very fond of attentions from men (with whom indeed she was reputed bold, but Olive scorned such boldness as that), given up to a merely personal, egotistical, instinctive life, and as unconscious of the tendencies of the age, the revenges of the future, the new truths and the great social questions, as if she had been a mere bundle of dress-trimmings, which she very nearly was. It was perfectly observable that she had no conscience, and it irritated Olive deeply to see how much trouble a woman was spared when she was constructed on that system. Adeline's "affairs," as I have intimated, her social relations, her views of Newton's education, her practice and her theory (for she had plenty of that, such as it was, heaven save the mark!), her spasmodic disposition to marry again, and her still sillier retreats in the presence of danger (for she had not even the courage of her frivolity), these things had been a subject of tragic consideration to Olive ever since the return of the elder sister to America. The tragedy was not in any particular harm that Mrs. Luna could do her (for she did her good, rather, that is, she did her honor, by laughing at her), but in the spectacle itself, the drama, guided by the hand of fate, of which the small, ignoble scenes unrolled themselves so logically. The *dénouement* would of course be in keeping, and would consist simply of the spiritual death of Mrs. Luna, who would end by understanding no common speech of Olive's at all, and would sink into mere worldly plumpness, into the last complacency, the supreme imbecility, of petty, genteel conservatism. As for Newton, he would be more utterly odious, if possible, as he grew up, than he was already; in fact, he would not grow up at all, but only grow down, if his mother should continue her infatuated system with him. He was insufferably forward and selfish; under the pretext of keeping him, at any cost, refined, Adeline had coddled and caressed him, having him always in her petticoats, remitting his lessons when he pretended he had an earache, drawing him into the conversation, letting him answer her back, with an impertinence beyond his years, when she administered the smallest check. The place for him, in Olive's eyes, was one of the public schools, where the children of the people would teach him his small importance, teach it, if necessary, by the aid of an occasional drubbing; and the two ladies had a grand discussion on this point before Mrs. Luna left Boston—a scene which ended in Adeline's clutching the irrepressible Newton to her bosom (he

came in at the moment), and demanding of him a vow that he would live and die in the principles of his mother. Mrs. Luna declared that if she must be trampled upon—and very likely it was her fate!—she would rather be trampled upon by men than by women, and that if Olive and her friends should get possession of the government they would be worse despots than those who were celebrated in history. Newton took an infant oath that he would never be a destructive, impious radical, and Olive felt that after this she needn't trouble herself any more about her sister, whom she simply committed to her fate. That fate might very properly be to marry an enemy of her country, a man who, no doubt, desired to treat women with the lash and manacles, as he and his people had formerly treated the wretched colored race. If she was so fond of the fine old institutions of the past, he would supply them to her in abundance; and if she wanted so much to be a conservative, she could try first how she liked being a conservative's wife. If Olive troubled herself little about Adeline, she troubled herself more about Basil Ransom; she said to herself that since he hated women who respected themselves (and each other), destiny would use him rightly in hanging a person like Adeline round his neck. That would be the way poetic justice ought to work, for him—and the law that our prejudices, when they act themselves out, punish us in doing so. Olive considered all this, as it was her effort to consider everything, from a very high point of view, and ended by feeling sure it was not for the sake of any nervous personal security that she desired to see her two relations in New York get mixed up together. If such an event as their marriage would gratify her sense of fitness, it would be simply as an illustration of certain laws. Olive, thanks to the philosophic cast of her mind, was exceedingly fond of illustrations of laws.

I hardly know, however, what illumination it was that sprang from her consciousness (now a source of considerable comfort), that Mrs. Farrinder was carrying the war into distant territories, and would return to Boston only in time to preside at a grand Female Convention, already advertised to take place in Boston in the month of June. It was agreeable to her that this imperial woman should be away; it made the field more free, the air more light; it suggested an exemption from official criticism. I have not taken space to mention certain episodes of the more recent intercourse of these ladies, and must content myself with tracing them, lightly, in their consequences. These may be summed up in the remark, which will doubtless startle no one by its freshness, that two imperial women are scarcely more likely to hit it off together, as the phrase is, than two imperial men. Since that party at Miss Birdseye's, so important in its results for Olive, she had had occasion to approach Mrs. Farrinder more nearly, and those overtures brought forth the knowledge that the great leader of the feminine revolution was the one person (in that part of the world) more concentrated, more determined, than herself. Miss Chancellor's aspirations, of late, had been immensely quickened; she had begun to believe in herself to a livelier tune than she had ever listened to before; and she now perceived that when spirit meets spirit there must either be mutual absorption or a sharp concussion. It had long been familiar to her that she should have to count with the obstinacy of the world at large, but she now discovered that she should have to count also with certain elements in the feminine camp. This complicated the problem, and such a complication, naturally, could not make Mrs. Farrinder appear more easy to assimilate. If Olive's was a high nature and so was hers, the fault was in neither; it was only an admonition that they were not needed as landmarks in the same part of the field. If such perceptions are delicate as between men, the reader need not be reminded of the exquisite form they may assume in natures more refined. So it was that Olive passed, in three months, from the stage of veneration to that of competition; and the process had been accelerated by the introduction of Verena into the fold. Mrs. Farrinder had behaved in the strangest way about Verena. First she had been struck with her, and then she hadn't; first she had seemed to want to take her in, then she had shied at her unmistakably—intimating to Olive that there were enough of that kind already. Of "that kind" indeed!—the phrase reverberated in Miss Chancellor's resentful soul. Was it possible she didn't know the kind Verena was of, and with what vulgar aspirants to notoriety did she confound her? It had been Olive's original desire to obtain Mrs. Farrinder's stamp for her *protégée,* she wished her to hold a commission from the commander-in-chief. With this view the two young women had made more than one pilgrimage to Roxbury, and on one of these occasions the sibylline mood (in its most charming form) had descended upon Verena. She had fallen into it, naturally and gracefully, in the course of talk, and poured out a stream of eloquence even more touching than her regular discourse at Miss Birdseye's. Mrs. Farrinder had taken it rather drily, and certainly it didn't resemble her own style of oratory, remarkable and cogent as this was. There had been considerable question of her writing a letter to the New York *Tribune,* the effect of which should be to launch Miss Tarrant into renown; but this beneficient epistle never appeared, and now Olive saw that there was no favor to come from the prophetess of Roxbury. There had been primnesses, pruderies, small reserves, which ended by staying her pen. If Olive didn't say at once that she was jealous of Verena's more attractive manner, it was only because such a declaration was destined to produce more effect a little later. What she did say was that evidently Mrs. Farrinder wanted to keep the movement in her own hands—viewed with suspicion certain romantic, aesthetic elements which Olive and Verena seemed to be trying to introduce into it. They insisted so much, for instance, on the historic unhappiness of women; but Mrs. Farrinder didn't appear to care anything for that, or indeed to know much about history at all. She seemed to begin just today, and she demanded their rights for them

whether they were unhappy or not. The upshot of this was that Olive threw herself on Verena's neck with a movement which was half indignation, half rapture; she exclaimed that they would have to fight the battle without human help, but, after all, it was better so. If they were all in all to each other, what more could they want? They would be isolated, but they would be free; and this view of the situation brought with it a feeling that they had almost already begun to be a force. It was not, indeed, that Olive's resentment faded quite away; for not only had she the sense, doubtless very presumptuous, that Mrs. Farrinder was the only person thereabouts of a stature to judge her (a sufficient cause of antagonism in itself, for if we like to be praised by our betters we prefer that censure should come from the other sort), but the kind of opinion she had unexpectedly betrayed, after implying such esteem in the earlier phase of their intercourse, made Olive's cheeks occasionally flush. She prayed heaven that *she* might never become so personal, so narrow. She was frivolous, worldly, an amateur, a trifler, a frequenter of Beacon Street; her taking up Verena Tarrant was only a kind of elderly, ridiculous doll-dressing: this was the light in which Miss Chancellor had reason to believe that it now suited Mrs. Farrinder to regard her! It was fortunate, perhaps, that the misrepresentation was so gross; yet, none the less, tears of wrath rose more than once to Olive's eyes when she reflected that this particular wrong had been put upon her. Frivolous, worldly, Beacon Street! She appealed to Verena to share in her pledge that the world should know in due time how much of that sort of thing there was about her. As I have already hinted, Verena at such moments quite rose to the occasion; she had private pangs at committing herself to give the cold shoulder to Beacon Street forever; but she was now so completely in Olive's hands that there was no sacrifice to which she would not have consented in order to prove that her benefactress was not frivolous.

The matter of her coming to stay for so long in Charles Street was arranged during a visit that Selah Tarrant paid there at Miss Chancellor's request. This interview, which had some curious features, would be worth describing, but I am forbidden to do more than mention the most striking of these. Olive wished to have an understanding with him; wished the situation to be clear, so that, disagreeable as it would be to her to receive him, she sent him a summons for a certain hour—an hour at which she had planned that Verena should be out of the house. She withheld this incident from the girl's knowledge, reflecting with some solemnity that it was the first deception (for Olive her silence was a deception) that she had yet practiced on her friend, and wondering whether she should have to practice others in the future. She then and there made up her mind that she would not shrink from others should they be necessary. She notified Tarrant that she should keep Verena a long time, and Tarrant remarked that it was certainly very pleasant to see her so happily located. But he also intimated that he should like to know what Miss Chancellor laid out to do with her; and the tone of this suggestion made Olive feel how right she had been to forsee that their interview would have the stamp of business. It assumed that complexion very definitely when she crossed over to her desk and wrote Mr. Tarrant a check for a very considerable amount. "Leave us alone—entirely alone—for a year, and then I will write you another": it was with these words she handed him the little strip of paper that meant so much, feeling, as she did so, that surely Mrs. Farrinder herself could not be less amateurish than that. Selah looked at the check, at Miss Chancellor, at the check again, at the ceiling, at the floor, at the clock, and once more at his hostess; then the document disappeared beneath the folds of his waterproof, and she saw that he was putting it into some queer place on his queer person. "Well, if I didn't believe you were going to help her to develop," he remarked; and he stopped, while his hands continued to fumble, out of sight, and he treated Olive to his large joyless smile. She assured him that he need have no fear on that score; Verena's development was the thing in the world in which she took most interest; she should have every opportunity for a free expansion. "Yes, that's the great thing," Selah said; "it's more important than attracting a crowd. That's all we shall ask of you; let her act out her nature. Don't all the trouble of humanity come from our being pressed back? Don't shut down the cover, Miss Chancellor; just let her overflow!" And again Tarrant illuminated his inquiry, his metaphor, by the strange and silent lateral movement of his jaws. He added, presently, that he supposed he should have to fix it with Mis' Tarrant; but Olive made no answer to that; she only looked at him with a face in which she intended to express that there was nothing that need detain him longer. She knew it had been fixed with Mrs. Tarrant; she had been over all that with Verena, who had told her that her mother was willing to sacrifice her for her highest good. She had reason to know (not through Verena, of course), that Mrs. Tarrant had embraced, tenderly, the idea of a pecuniary compensation, and there was no fear of her making a scene when Tarrant should come back with a check in his pocket. "Well, I trust she *may* develop, richly, and that you may accomplish what you desire; it seems as if we had only a little way to go further," that worthy observed, as he erected himself for departure.

"It's not a little way; it's a very long way," Olive replied, rather sternly.

Tarrant was on the threshold; he lingered a little, embarrassed by her grimness, for he himself had always inclined to rose-colored views of progress, of the march of truth. He had never met any one so much in earnest as this definite, literal young woman, who had taken such an unhoped-for fancy to his daughter; whose longing for the new day had such perversities of pessimism, and who, in the midst of something that appeared to be terribly searching in her honesty, was willing to corrupt him, as a father, with the most extravagant orders on her bank. He hardly knew in what language to speak to her; it

seemed as if there was nothing soothing enough, when a lady adopted that tone about a movement which was thought by some of the brightest to be so promising. "Oh, well, I guess there's some kind of mysterious law . . ." he murmured, almost timidly; and so he passed from Miss Chancellor's sight.

She hoped she should not soon see him again, and there appeared to be no reason she should, if their intercourse was to be conducted by means of checks. The understanding with Verena was, of course, complete; she had promised to stay with her friend as long as her friend should require it. She had said at first that she couldn't give up her mother, but she had been made to feel that there was no question of giving up. She should be as free as air, to go and come; she could spend hours and days with her mother, whenever Mrs. Tarrant required her attention; all that Olive asked of her was that, for the time, she should regard Charles Street as her home. There was no struggle about this, for the simple reason that by the time the question came to the front Verena was completely under the charm. The idea of Olive's charm will perhaps make the reader smile; but I use the word not in its derived, but in its literal sense. The fine web of authority, of dependence, that her strenuous companion had woven about her, was now as dense as a suit of golden mail; and Verena was thoroughly interested in their great undertaking; she saw it in the light of an active, enthusiastic faith. The benefit that her father desired for her was now assured; she expanded, developed, on the most liberal scale. Olive saw the difference, and you may imagine how she rejoiced in it; she had never known a greater pleasure. Verena's former attitude had been girlish submission, grateful, curious sympathy. She had given herself, in her young, amused surprise, because Olive's stronger will and the incisive proceedings with which she pointed her purpose drew her on. Besides, she was held by hospitality, the vision of new social horizons, the sense of novelty, and the love of change. But now the girl was disinterestedly attached to the precious things they were to do together; she cared about them for themselves, believed in them ardently, had them constantly in mind. Her share in the union of the two young women was no longer passive, purely appreciative; it was passionate, too, and it put forth a beautiful energy. If Olive desired to get Verena into training, she could flatter herself that the process had already begun, and that her colleague enjoyed it almost as much as she. Therefore she could say to herself, without the imputation of heartlessness, that when she left her mother it was for a noble, a sacred use. In point of fact, she left her very little, and she spent hours in jingling, aching, jostled journeys between Charles Street and the stale suburban cottage. Mrs. Tarrant sighed and grimaced, wrapped herself more than ever in her mantle, said she didn't know as she was fit to struggle alone, and that, half the time, if Verena was away, she wouldn't have the nerve to answer the doorbell; she was incapable, of course, of neglecting such an opportunity to posture as one who paid with her heart's blood for leading the van of human progress. But Verena had an inner sense (she judged her mother now, a little, for the first time), that she would be sorry to be taken at her word, and that she felt safe enough in trusting to her daughter's generosity. She could not divest herself of the faith—even now that Mrs. Luna was gone, leaving no trace, and the gray walls of a sedentary winter were apparently closing about the two young women—she could not renounce the theory that a residence in Charles Street must at least produce some contact with the brilliant classes. She was vexed at her daughter's resignation to not going to parties and to Miss Chancellor's not giving them; but it was nothing new for her to have to practice patience, and she could feel, at least, that it was just as handy for Mr. Burrage to call on the child in town, where he spent half his time, sleeping constantly at Parker's.

It was a fact that this fortunate youth called very often, and Verena saw him with Olive's full concurrence whenever she was at home. It had now been quite agreed between them that no artificial limits should be set to the famous phase; and Olive had, while it lasted, a sense of real heroism in steeling herself against uneasiness. It seemed to her, moreover, only justice that she should make some concession; if Verena made a great sacrifice of filial duty in coming to live with her (this, of course, should be permanent—she would buy off the Tarrants from year to year), she must not incur the imputation (the world would judge her, in that case, ferociously) of keeping her from forming common social ties. The friendship of a young man and a young woman was, according to the pure code of New England, a common social tie; and as the weeks elapsed Miss Chancellor saw no reason to repent of her temerity. Verena was not falling in love; she felt that she should know it, should guess it on the spot. Verena was fond of human intercourse; she was essentially a sociable creature; she liked to shine and smile and talk and listen; and so far as Henry Burrage was concerned he introduced an element of easy and convenient relaxation into a life now a good deal stiffened (Olive was perfectly willing to own it) by great civic purposes. But the girl was being saved, without interference, by the simple operation of her interest in those very designs. From this time there was no need of putting pressure on her; her own springs were working; the fire with which she glowed came from within. Sacredly, brightly single she would remain; her only espousals would be at the altar of a great cause. Olive always absented herself when Mr. Burrage

was announced; and when Verena afterwards attempted to give some account of his conversation she checked her, said she would rather know nothing about it—all with a very solemn mildness; this made her feel very superior, truly noble. She knew by this time (I scarcely can tell how, since Verena could give her no report), exactly what sort of a youth Mr. Burrage was: he was weakly pretentious, softly original, cultivated eccentricity, patronized progress, liked to have mysteries, sudden appointments to keep, anonymous persons to visit, the air of leading a double life, of being devoted to a girl whom people didn't know, or at least didn't meet. Of course he liked to make an impression on Verena; but what he mainly liked was to play her off upon the other girls, the daughters of fashion, with whom he danced at Papanti's. Such were the images that proceeded from Olive's rich moral consciousness. "Well, he *is* greatly interested in our movement": so much Verena once managed to announce; but the words rather irritated Miss Chancellor, who, as we know, did not care to allow for accidental exceptions in the great masculine conspiracy.

In the month of March Verena told her that Mr. Burrage was offering matrimony—offering it with much insistence, begging that she would at least wait and think of it before giving him a final answer. Verena was evidently very glad to be able to say to Olive that she had assured him she couldn't think of it, and that if he expected this he had better not come any more. He continued to come, and it was therefore to be supposed that he had ceased to count on such a concession; it was now Olive's opinion that he really didn't desire it. She had a theory that he proposed to almost any girl who was not likely to accept him—did it because he was making a collection of such episodes—a mental album of declarations, blushes, hesitations, refusals that just missed imposing themselves as acceptances, quite as he collected enamels and Cremona violins. He would be very sorry indeed to ally himself to the house of Tarrant; but such a fear didn't prevent him from holding it becoming in a man of taste to give that encouragement to low-born girls who were pretty, for one looked out for the special cases in which, for reasons (even the lowest might have reasons), they wouldn't "rise." "I told you I wouldn't marry him, and I won't," Verena said, delightedly, to her friend; her tone suggested that a certain credit belonged to her for the way she carried out her assurance. "I never thought you would, if you didn't want to," Olive replied to this; and Verena could have no rejoinder but the good-humor that sat in her eyes, unable as she was to say that she had wanted to. They had a little discussion, however, when she intimated that she pitied him for his discomfiture, Olive's contention being that, selfish, conceited, pampered and insincere, he might properly be left now to digest his affront. Miss Chancellor felt none of the remorse now that she would have felt six months before at standing in the way of such a chance for Verena, and she would have been very angry if any one had asked her if she were not afraid of taking too much upon herself. She would have said, moreover, that she stood in no one's way, and that even if she were not there Verena would never think seriously of a frivolous little man who fiddled while Rome was burning. This did not prevent Olive from making up her mind that they had better go to Europe in the spring; a year's residence in that quarter of the globe would be highly agreeable to Verena, and might even contribute to the evolution of her genius. It cost Miss Chancellor an effort to admit that any virtue still lingered in the elder world, and that it could have any important lesson for two such good Americans as her friend and herself; but it suited her just then to make this assumption, which was not altogether sincere. It was recommended by the idea that it would get her companion out of the way—out of the way of officious fellow-citizens—till she should be absolutely firm on her feet, and would also give greater intensity to their own long conversation. On that continent of strangers they would cleave more closely still to each other. This, of course, would be to fly before the inevitable "phase," much more than to face it; but Olive decided that if they should reach unscathed the term of their delay (the first of July) she should have faced it as much as either justice or generosity demanded. I may as well say at once that she traversed most of this period without further serious alarms and with a great many little thrills of bliss and hope.

Nothing happened to dissipate the good omens with which her partnership with Verena Tarrant was at present surrounded. They threw themselves into study; they had innumerable big books from the Athenaeum, and consumed the midnight oil. Henry Burrage, after Verena had shaken her head at him so sweetly and sadly, returned to New York, giving no sign; they only heard that he had taken refuge under the ruffled maternal wing. (Olive, at least, took for granted the wing was ruffled; she could fancy how Mrs. Burrage would be affected by the knowledge that her son had been refused by the daughter of a mesmeric healer. She would be almost as angry as if she had learnt that he had been accepted.) Matthias Pardon had not yet taken his revenge in the newspapers; he was perhaps nursing his thunderbolts; at any rate, now that the operatic season had begun, he was much occupied in interviewing the principal singers, one of whom he described in one of the leading journals (Olive, at least, was sure it was only he who could write like that), as " a dear little woman with baby dimples and kittenish movements." The Tarrants were apparently given up to a measure of sensual ease with which they had not hitherto been familiar, thanks to the increase of income that they drew from their eccentric protectress. Mrs. Tarrant now enjoyed the ministrations of a "girl"; it was partly her pride (at any rate, she chose to give it this turn), that her house had for many years been conducted without the element—so debasing on both sides—of servile, mercenary labor. She wrote to Olive (she was perpetually writing to her now, but Olive never answered),

that she was conscious of having fallen to a lower plane, but she admitted that it was a prop to her wasted spirit to have some one to converse with when Selah was off. Verena, of course, perceived the difference, which was inadequately explained by the theory of a sudden increase of her father's practice (nothing of her father's had ever increased like that), and ended by guessing the cause of it—a discovery which did not in the least disturb her equanimity. She accepted the idea that her parents should receive a pecuniary tribute from the extraordinary friend whom she had encountered on the threshold of womanhood, just as she herself accepted that friend's irresistible hospitality. She had no worldly pride, no traditions of independence, no ideas of what was done and what was not done; but there was only one thing that equalled this perfectly gentle and natural insensibility to favors—namely, the inveteracy of her habit of not asking them. Olive had had an apprehension that she would flush a little at learning the terms on which they should now be able to pursue their career together; but Verena never changed color; it was either not new or not disagreeable to her that the authors of her being should be bought off, silenced by money, treated as the troublesome of the lower orders are treated when they are not locked up; so that her friend had a perception, after this, that it would probably be impossible in any way ever to offend her. She was too rancorless, too detached from conventional standards, too free from private self-reference. It was too much to say of her that she forgave injuries, since she was not conscious of them; there was in forgiveness a certain arrogance of which she was incapable, and her bright mildness glided over the many traps that life sets for our consistency. Olive had always held that pride was necessary to character, but there was no peculiarity of Verena's that could make her spirit seem less pure. The added luxuries in the little house at Cambridge, which even with their help was still such a penal settlement, made her feel afresh that before she came to the rescue the daughter of that house had traversed a desert of sordid misery. She had cooked and washed and swept and stitched; she had worked harder than any of Miss Chancellor's servants. These things had left no trace upon her person or her mind; everything fresh and fair renewed itself in her with extraordinary facility, everything ugly and tiresome evaporated as soon as it touched her; but Olive deemed that, being what she was, she had a right to immense compensations. In the future she should have exceeding luxury and ease, and Miss Chancellor had no difficulty in persuading herself that persons doing the high intellectual and moral work to which the two young ladies in Charles Street were now committed owed it to themselves, owed it to the groaning sisterhood, to cultivate the best material conditions. She herself was nothing of a sybarite, and she had proved, visiting the alleys and slums of Boston in the service of the Associated Charities, that there was no foulness of disease or misery she feared to look in the face; but her house had always been thoroughly well regulated, she was passionately clean, and she was an excellent woman of business. Now, however, she elevated daintiness to a religion; her interior shone with superfluous friction, with punctuality, with winter roses. Among these soft influences Verena herself bloomed like the flower that attains such perfection in Boston. Olive had always rated high the native refinement of her countrywomen, their latent "adaptability," their talent for accommodating themselves at a glance to changed conditions; but the way her companion rose with the level of the civilization that surrounded her, the way she assimilated all delicacies and absorbed all traditions, left this friendly theory halting behind. The winter days were still, indoors, in Charles Street, and the winter nights secure from interruption. Our two young women had plenty of duties, but Olive had never favored the custom of running in and out. Much conference on social and reformatory topics went forward under her roof, and she received her colleagues—she belonged to twenty associations and committees—only at preappointed hours, which she expected them to observe rigidly. Verena's share in these proceedings was not active; she hovered over them, smiling, listening, dropping occasionally a fanciful though never an idle word, like some gently animated image placed there for good omen. It was understood that her part was before the scenes, not behind; that she was not a prompter, but (potentially, at least) a "popular favorite," and that the work over which Miss Chancellor presided so efficiently was a general preparation of the platform on which, later, her companion would execute the most striking steps.

The western windows of Olive's drawing room, looking over the water, took in the red sunsets of winter; the long, low bridge that crawled, on its staggering posts, across the Charles; the casual patches of ice and snow; the desolate suburban horizons, peeled and made bald by the rigor of the season; the general hard, cold void of the prospect; the extrusion, at Charlestown, at Cambridge, of a few chimneys and steeples, straight, sordid tubes of factories and engine-shops, or spare, heavenward finger of the New England meeting house. There was something inexorable in the poverty of the scene, shameful in the meanness of its details, which gave a collective impression of boards and tin and frozen earth, sheds and rotting piles, railwaylines striding flat across a thoroughfare of puddles, and tracks of the humbler, the universal horsecar, traversing obliquely this path of danger; loose fences, vacant lots, mounds of refuse, yards bestrewn with iron pipes, telegraph poles, and bare wooden backs of places. Verena thought such a view lovely, and she was by no means without excuse when, as the afternoon closed, the ugly picture was tinted with a clear, cold rosiness. The air, in its windless chill, seemed to tinkle like a crystal, the faintest gradations of tone were perceptible in the sky, the west became deep and delicate, everything grew doubly distinct before taking on the dimness of evening. There were pink flushes on snow, "tender" reflections in patches of stiffened marsh, sounds of car-bells, no longer vulgar, but almost silvery, on the long bridge,

lonely outlines of distant dusky undulations against the fading glow. These agreeable effects used to light up that end of the drawing room, and Olive often sat at the window with her companion before it was time for the lamp. They admired the sunsets, they rejoiced in the ruddy spots projected upon the parlor wall, they followed the darkening perspective in fanciful excursions. They watched the stellar points come out at last in a colder heaven, and then, shuddering a little, arm in arm, they turned away, with a sense that the winter night was even more cruel than the tyranny of men—turned back to drawn curtains and a brighter fire and a glittering tea-tray and more and more talk about the long martyrdom of women, a subject as to which Olive was inexhaustible and really most interesting. There were some nights of deep snowfall, when Charles Street was white and muffled and the doorbell foredoomed to silence, which seemed little islands of lamplight, of enlarged and intensified vision. They read a great deal of history together, and read it ever with the same thought—that of finding confirmation in it for this idea that their sex had suffered inexpressibly, and that at any moment in the course of human affairs the state of the world would have been so much less horrible (history seemed to them in every way horrible), if women had been able to press down the scale. Verena was full of suggestions which stimulated discussions; it was she, oftenest, who kept in view the fact that a good many women in the past had been intrusted with power and had not always used it amiably, who brought up the wicked queens, the profligate mistresses of kings. These ladies were easily disposed of between the two, and the public crimes of Bloody Mary, the private misdemeanors of Faustina, wife of the pure Marcus Aurelius, were very satisfactorily classified. If the influence of women in the past accounted for every act of virtue that men had happened to achieve, it only made the matter balance properly that the influence of men should explain the casual irregularities of the other sex. Olive could see how few books had passed through Verena's hands, and how little the home of the Tarrants had been a house of reading; but the girl now traversed the fields of literature with her characteristic lightness of step. Everything she turned to or took up became an illustration of the facility, the "giftedness," which Olive, who had so little of it, never ceased to wonder at and prize. Nothing frightened her; she always smiled at it, she could do anything she tried. As she knew how to do other things, she knew how to study; she read quickly and remembered infallibly; could repeat, days afterward, passages that she appeared only to have glanced at. Olive, of course, was more and more happy to think that their cause should have the services of an organization so rare.

All this doubtless sounds rather dry, and I hasten to add that our friends were not always shut up in Miss Chancellor's strenuous parlor. In spite of Olive's desire to keep her precious inmate to herself and to bend her attention upon their common studies, in spite of her constantly reminding Verena that this winter was to be purely educative and that the platitudes of the satisfied and unregenerate would have little to teach her, in spite, in short, of the severe and constant duality of our young women, it must not be supposed that their life had not many personal confluents and tributaries. Individual and original as Miss Chancellor was universally acknowledged to be, she was yet a typical Bostonian, and as a typical Bostonian she could not fail to belong in some degree to a "set." It had been said of her that she was in it but not of it; but she was of it enough to go occasionally into other houses and to receive their occupants in her own. It was her belief that she filled her teapot with the spoon of hospitality, and made a good many select spirits feel that they were welcome under her roof at convenient hours. She had a preference for what she called *real* people, and there were several whose reality she had tested by arts known to herself. This little society was rather suburban and miscellaneous; it was prolific in ladies who trotted about, early and late, with books from the Athenæum nursed behind their muff, or little nosegays of exquisite flowers that they were carrying as presents to each other. Verena, who, when Olive was not with her, indulged in a good deal of desultory contemplation at the window, saw them pass the house in Charles Street, always apparently straining a little, as if they might be too late for something. At almost any time, for she envied their preoccupation, she would have taken the chance with them. Very often, when she described them to her mother, Mrs. Tarrant didn't know who they were; they were even days (she had so many discouragements) when it seemed as if she didn't want to know. So long as they were not someone else, it seemed to be no use that they were themselves; whoever they were, they were sure to have that defect. Even after all her mother's disquisitions Verena had but vague ideas as to whom she would have liked them to be; and it was only when the girl talked of the concerts, to all of which Olive subscribed and conducted her inseparable friend, that Mrs. Tarrant appeared to feel in any degree that her daughter was living up to the standard formed for her in their Cambridge home. As all the world knows, the opportunities in Boston for hearing good music are numerous and excellent, and it had long been Miss Chancellor's practice to cultivate the best. She went in, as the phrase is, for the superior programs, and that high, dim, dignified Music Hall, which has echoed in its time to so much eloquence and so much melody, and of which the very proportions and color seem to teach respect and attention, shed the protection of its illuminated cornice, this winter, upon no faces more intelligently upturned than those of the young women for whom Bach and Beethoven only repeated, in a myriad form, the idea that was always with them. Symphonies and fugues only stimulated their convictions, excited their revolutionary passion, led their imagination further in the direction in which it was always pressing. It lifted them to immeasurable heights; and as they sat looking at the great florid, somber organ, overhanging the bronze

statue of Beethoven, they felt that this was the only temple in which the votaries of their creed could worship.

And yet their music was not their greatest joy, for they had two others which they cultivated at least as zealously. One of these was simply the society of old Miss Birdseye, of whom Olive saw more this winter than she had ever seen before. It had become apparent that her long and beautiful career was drawing to a close, her earnest, unremitting work was over, her old-fashioned weapons were broken and dull. Olive would have liked to hang them up as venerable relics of a patient fight, and this was what she seemed to do when she made the poor lady relate her battles—never glorious and brilliant, but obscure and wastefully heroic—call back the figures of her companions in arms, exhibit her medals and scars. Miss Birdseye knew that her uses were ended; she might pretend still to go about the business of unpopular causes, might fumble for papers in her immemorial satchel and think she had important appointments, might sign petitions, attend conventions, say to Doctor Prance that if she would only make her sleep she should live to see a great many improvements yet; she ached and was weary, growing almost as glad to look back (a great anomaly for Miss Birdseye) as to look forward. She let herself be coddled now by her friends of the new generation; there were days when she seemed to want nothing better than to sit by Olive's fire and ramble on about the old struggles, with a vague, comfortable sense—no physical rapture of Miss Birdseye's could be very acute—of immunity from wet feet, from the draughts that prevail at thin meetings, of independence of streetcars that would probably arrive overflowing; and also a pleased perception, not that she was an example to these fresh lives which began with more advantages than hers, but that she was in some degree an encouragement, as she helped them to measure the way the new truths had advanced—being able to tell them of such a different state of things when she was a young lady, the daughter of a very talented teacher (indeed her mother had been a teacher too), down in Connecticut. She had always had for Olive a kind of aroma of martyrdom, and her battered, unremunerated, unpensioned old age brought angry tears, springing from depths of outraged theory, into Miss Chancellor's eyes. For Verena, too, she was a picturesque humanitary figure. Verena had been in the habit of meeting martyrs from her childhood up, but she had seen none with so many reminiscences as Miss Birdseye, or who had been so nearly scorched by penal fires. She had had escapes, in the early days of abolitionism, which it was a marvel she could tell with so little implication that she had shown courage. She had roamed through certain parts of the South, carrying the Bible to the slave; and more than one of her companions, in the course of these expeditions, had been tarred and feathered. She herself, at one season, had spent a month in a Georgian jail. She had preached temperance in Irish circles where the doctrine was received with missiles; she had interfered between wives and husbands mad with drink; she had taken filthy children, picked up in the street, to her own poor rooms, and had removed their pestilent rags and washed their sore bodies with slippery little hands. In her own person she appeared to Olive and Verena a representative of suffering humanity; the pity they felt for her was part of their pity for all who were weakest and most hardly used; and it struck Miss Chancellor (more especially) that this frumpy little missionary was the last link in a tradition, and that when she should be called away the heroic age of New England life—the age of plain living and high thinking, of pure ideals and earnest effort, of moral passion and noble experiment—would effectually be closed. It was the perennial freshness of Miss Birdseye's faith that had had such a contagion for these modern maidens, the unquenched flame of her transcendentalism, the simplicity of her vision, the way in which, in spite of mistakes, deceptions, the changing fashions of reform, which make the remedies of a previous generation look as ridiculous as their bonnets, the only thing that was still actual for her was the elevation of the species by the reading of Emerson and the frequentation of Tremont Temple. Olive had been active enough, for years, in the city-missions; she too had scoured dirty children, and, in squalid lodging-houses, had gone into rooms where the domestic situation was strained and the noises made the neighbors turn pale. But she reflected that after such exertions she had the refreshment of a pretty house, a drawing room full of flowers, a crackling hearth, where she threw in pine-cones and made them snap, an imported tea-service, a Chickering piano, and the *Deutsche Rundschau;* whereas Miss Birdseye had only a bare, vulgar room, with a hideous flowered carpet (it looked like a dentist's), a cold furnace, the evening-paper, and Doctor Prance. Olive and Verena were present at another of her gatherings before the winter ended; it resembled the occasion that we described at the beginning of this history, with the difference that Mrs. Farrinder was not there to oppress the company with her greatness, and that Verena made a speech without the co-operation of her father. This young lady had delivered herself with even finer effect than before, and Olive could see how much she had gained, in confidence and range of allusion, since the educative process in Charles Street began. Her *motif* was now a kind of unprepared tribute to Miss Birdseye, the fruit of the occasion and of the unanimous tenderness of the younger members of the circle, which made her a willing mouthpiece. She pictured her laborious career, her early associates (Eliza P. Moseley was not neglected as Verena passed), her difficulties and dangers and triumphs, her humanizing effect upon so many, her serene and honored old age—expressed, in short, as one of the ladies said, just the very way they all felt about her. Verena's face brightened and grew triumphant as she spoke, but she brought tears into the eyes of most of the others. It was Olive's opinion that nothing could be more graceful and touching, and she saw that the

impression made was now deeper than on the former evening. Miss Birdseye went about with her eighty years of innocence, her undiscriminating spectacles, asking her friends if it wasn't perfectly splendid; she took none of it to herself, she regarded it only as a brilliant expression of Verena's gift. Olive thought, afterwards, that if a collection could only be taken up on the spot, the good lady would be made easy for the rest of her days; then she remembered that most of her guests were as impecunious as herself.

I have intimated that our young friends had a source of fortifying emotion which was distinct from the hours they spent with Beethoven and Bach, or in hearing Miss Birdseye describe Concord as it used to be. This consisted in the wonderful insight they had obtained into the history of feminine anguish. They perused that chapter perpetually and zealously, and they derived from it the purest part of their mission. Olive had pored over it so long, so earnestly, that she was now in complete possession of the subject; it was the one thing in life which she felt she had really mastered. She was able to exhibit it to Verena with the greatest authority and accuracy, to lead her up and down, in and out, through all the darkest and most tortuous passages. We know that she was without belief in her own eloquence, but she was very eloquent when she reminded Verena how the exquisite weakness of women had never been their defense, but had only exposed them to sufferings more acute than masculine grossness can conceive. Their odious partner had trampled upon them from the beginning of time, and their tenderness, their abnegation, had been his opportunity. All the bullied wives, the stricken mothers, the dishonored, deserted maidens who have lived on the earth and longed to leave it, passed and repassed before her eyes, and the interminable dim procession seemed to stretch out a myriad hands to her. She sat with them at their trembling vigils, listened for the tread, the voice, at which they grew pale and sick, walked with them by the dark waters that offered to wash away misery and shame, took with them, even, when the vision grew intense, the last shuddering leap. She had analyzed to an extraordinary fineness their susceptibility, their softness; she knew (or she thought she knew) all the possible tortures of anxiety, of suspense and dread; and she had made up her mind that it was women, in the end, who had paid for everything. In the last resort the whole burden of the human lot came upon them; it pressed upon them far more than on the others, the intolerable load of fate. It was they who sat cramped and chained to receive it; it was they who had done all the waiting and taken all the wounds. The sacrifices, the blood, the tears, the terrors were theirs. Their organism was in itself a challenge to suffering, and men had practiced upon it with an impudence that knew no bounds. As they were the weakest most had been wrung from them, and as they were the most generous they had been most deceived. Olive Chancellor would have rested her case, had it been necessary, on those general facts; and her simple and comprehensive contention was that the peculiar wretchedness which had been the very essence of the feminine lot was a monstrous artificial imposition, crying aloud for redress. She was willing to admit that women, too, could be bad; that there were many about the world who were false, immoral, vile. But their errors were as nothing to their sufferings; they had expiated, in advance, an eternity, if need be, of misconduct. Olive poured forth these views to her listening and responsive friend; she presented them again and again, and there was no light in which they did not seem to palpitate with truth. Verena was immensely wrought upon; a subtle fire passed into her; she was not so hungry for revenge as Olive, but at the last, before they went to Europe (I shall take no place to describe the manner in which she threw herself into that project), she quite agreed with her companion that after so many ages of wrong (it would also be after the European journey) men must take *their* turn, men must pay!

Book Second

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Basil Ransom lived in New York, rather far to the eastward, and in the upper reaches of the town; he occupied two small shabby rooms in a somewhat decayed mansion which stood next to the corner of the Second Avenue. The corner itself was formed by a considerable grocer's shop, the near neighborhood of which was fatal to any pretensions Ransom and his fellow-lodgers might have had in regard to gentility of situation. The house had a red, rusty face, and faded green shutters, of which the slats were limp and at variance with each other. In one of the lower windows was suspended a fly-blown card, with the words "Table Board" affixed in letters cut (not very neatly) out of colored paper, of graduated tints, and surrounded with a small band of stamped gilt. The two sides of the shop were protected by an immense penthouse shed, which projected over a greasy pavement and was supported by wooden posts fixed in the curbstone. Beneath it, on the dislocated flags, barrels and baskets were freely and picturesquely grouped; an open cellarway yawned beneath the feet of those who might pause to gaze too fondly on the savory wares displayed in the window; a strong odor of smoked fish, combined with a fragrance of molasses, hung about the spot; the pavement, toward the gutters, was fringed with dirty panniers, heaped with potatoes, carrots, and onions; and a smart, bright wagon, with the horse detached from the shafts, drawn up on the edge of the abominable road (it contained holes and ruts a foot deep, and immemorial accumulations of stagnant mud), imparted an idle, rural, pastoral air to a scene otherwise perhaps expressive of a rank civilization. The establishment was of the kind known to New Yorkers as a Dutch grocery; and red-faced, yellow-haired, bare-armed vendors might have been observed to lounge in the doorway. I mention it not on account of any particular influence it may have had on the life or the thought of Basil Ransom, but for old acquaintance sake and that of local color; besides which, a figure is nothing without a setting, and our young man came and went every day, with rather an indifferent, unperceiving step, it is true, among the objects I have briefly designated. One of his rooms was directly above the street-door of the house; such a dormitory, when it is so exiguous, is called in the nomenclature of New York a "hall bedroom." The sitting room, beside it, was slightly larger, and they both commanded a row of tenements no less degenerate than Ransom's own habitation—houses built forty years before, and already sere and superannuated. These were also painted red, and the bricks were accentuated by a white line; they were garnished, on the first floor, with balconies covered with small tin roofs, striped in different colors, and with an elaborate iron lattice-work, which gave them a repressive, cagelike appearance, and caused them slightly to resemble the little boxes for peeping unseen into the street, which are a feature of oriental towns. Such posts of observation commanded a view of the grocery on the corner, of the relaxed and disjointed roadway, enlivened at the curbstone with an occasional ash-barrel or with gas-lamps drooping from the perpendicular, and westward, at the end of the truncated vista, of the fantastic skeleton of the Elevated Railway, overhanging the transverse longitudinal street, which it darkened and smothered with the immeasurable spinal column and myriad clutching paws of an antediluvian monster. If the opportunity were not denied me here, I should like to give some account of Basil Ransom's interior, of certain curious persons of both sexes, for the most part not favorites of fortune, who had found an obscure asylum there; some picture of the crumpled little *table d'hôte,* at two dollars and a half a week, where everything felt sticky, which went forward in the low-ceiled basement, under the conduct of a couple of shuffling negresses, who mingled in the conversation and indulged in low, mysterious chuckles when it took a facetious turn. But we need, in strictness, concern ourselves with it no further than to gather the implication that the young Mississippian, even a year and a half after that momentous visit of his to Boston, had not made his profession very lucrative.

He had been diligent, he had been ambitious, but he had not yet been successful. During the few weeks preceding the moment at which we meet him again, he had even begun to lose faith altogether in his earthly destiny. It became much of a question with him whether success in any form was written there; whether for a hungry young Mississippian, without means, without friends, wanting, too, in the highest energy, the wisdom of the serpent, personal arts and national prestige, the game of life was to be won in New York. He had been on the point of giving it up and returning to the home of his ancestors, where, as he heard from his mother, there was still just a sufficient supply of hot corn-cake to support existence. He had never believed much in his luck, but during the last year it had been guilty of aberrations surprising even to a constant, an imperturbable, victim of fate. Not only had he not extended his connection, but he had lost most of the little business which was an object of complacency to him a twelvemonth before. He had had none but small jobs, and he had made a mess of more than one of them. Such accidents had not had a happy effect upon his reputation; he had been able to perceive that this fair flower may be nipped

when it is so tender a bud as scarcely to be palpable. He had formed a partnership with a person who seemed likely to repair some of his deficiencies—a young man from Rhode Island, acquainted, according to his own expression, with the inside track. But this gentleman himself, as it turned out, would have been better for a good deal of remodeling, and Ransom's principal deficiency, which was, after all, that of cash, was not less apparent to him after his colleague, prior to a sudden and unexplained departure for Europe, had drawn the slender accumulations of the firm out of the bank. Ransom sat for hours in his office, waiting for clients who either did not come, or, if they did come, did not seem to find him encouraging, as they usually left him with the remark that they would think what they would do. They thought to little purpose, and seldom reappeared, so that at last he began to wonder whether there were not a prejudice against his Southern complexion. Perhaps they didn't like the way he spoke. If they could show him a better way, he was willing to adopt it; but the manner of New York could not be acquired by precept, and example, somehow, was not in this case contagious. He wondered whether he were stupid and unskilled, and he was finally obliged to confess to himself that he was unpractical.

This confession was in itself a proof of the fact, for nothing could be less fruitful than such a speculation, terminating in such a way. He was perfectly aware that he cared a great deal for the theory, and so his visitors must have thought when they found him, with one of his long legs twisted round the other, reading a volume of De Tocqueville. That was the kind of reading he liked; he had thought a great deal about social and economical questions, forms of government and the happiness of peoples. The convictions he had arrived at were not such as mix gracefully with the time-honored verities a young lawyer looking out for business is in the habit of taking for granted; but he had to reflect that these doctrines would probably not contribute any more to his prosperity in Mississippi than in New York. Indeed, he scarcely could think of the country where they would be a particular advantage to him. It came home to him that his opinions were stiff, whereas in comparison his effort was lax; and he accordingly began to wonder whether he might not make a living by his opinions. He had always had a desire for public life; to cause one's ideas to be embodied in national conduct appeared to him the highest form of human enjoyment. But there was little enough that was public in his solitary studies, and he asked himself what was the use of his having an office at all, and why he might not as well carry on his profession at the Astor Library, where, in his spare hours and on chance holidays, he did an immense deal of suggestive reading. He took copious notes and memoranda, and these things sometimes shaped themselves in a way that might possibly commend them to the editors of periodicals. Readers perhaps would come, if clients didn't; so he produced, with a great deal of labor, half a dozen articles, from which, when they were finished, it seemed to him that he had omitted all the points he wished most to make, and addressed them to the powers that preside over weekly and monthly publications. They were all declined with thanks, and he would have been forced to believe that the accent of his linguid clime brought him luck as little under the pen as on the lips, had not another explanation been suggested by one of the more explicit of his oracles, in relation to a paper on the rights of minorities. This gentleman pointed out that his doctrines were about three hundred years behind the age; doubtless some magazine of the sixteenth century would have been very happy to print them. This threw light on his own suspicion that he was attached to causes that could only, in the nature of things, be unpopular. The disagreeable editor was right about his being out of date, only he had got the time wrong. He had come centuries too soon; he was not too old, but too new. Such an impression, however, would not have prevented him from going into politics, if there had been any other way to represent constituencies than by being elected. People might be found eccentric enough to vote for him in Mississippi, but meanwhile where should he find the twenty-dollar greenbacks which it was his ambition to transmit from time to time to his female relations, confined so constantly to a farinaceous diet? It came over him with some force that his opinions would not yield interest, and the evaporation of this pleasing hypothesis made him feel like a man in an open boat, at sea, who should just have parted with his last rag of canvas.

I shall not attempt a complete description of Ransom's ill-starred views, being convinced that the reader will guess them as he goes, for they had a frolicsome, ingenious way of peeping out of the young man's conversation. I shall do them sufficient justice in saying that he was by natural disposition a good deal of a stoic, and that, as the result of a considerable intellectual experience, he was, in social and political matters, a reactionary. I suppose he was very conceited, for he was much addicted to judging his age. He thought it talkative, querulous, hysterical, maudlin, full of false ideas, of unhealthy germs, of extravagant, dissipated habits, for which a great reckoning was in store. He was an immense admirer of the late Thomas Carlyle, and was very suspicious of the encroachments of modern democracy. I know not exactly how these queer heresies had planted themselves, but he had a longish pedigree (it had flowered at one time with English royalists and cavaliers), and he seemed at moments to be inhabited by some transmitted spirit of a robust but narrow ancestor, some broad-faced wig-wearer or sword-bearer, with a more primitive conception of manhood than our modern temperament appears to require, and a program of human felicity much less varied. He liked his pedigree, he revered his forefathers, and he rather pitied those who might come after him. In saying so, however, I betray him a little, for he never mentioned such feelings as these. Though he thought the age too talkative, as I have hinted, he liked to talk as well as

anyone; but he could hold his tongue, if that were more expressive, and he usually did so when his perplexities were greatest. He had been sitting for several evenings in a beer-cellar, smoking his pipe with a profundity of reticence. This attitude was so unbroken that it marked a crisis—the complete, the acute consciousness of his personal situation. It was the cheapest way he knew of spending an evening. At this particular establishment the *Schoppen* were very tall and the beer was very good; and as the host and most of the guests were German, and their colloquial tongue was unknown to him, he was not drawn into any undue expenditure of speech. He watched his smoke and he thought, thought so hard that at last he appeared to himself to have exhausted the thinkable. When this moment of combined relief and dismay arrived (on the last of the evenings that we are concerned with), he took his way down Third Avenue and reached his humble dwelling. Till within a short time there had been a resource for him at such an hour and in such a mood; a little variety-actress, who lived in the house, and with whom he had established the most cordial relations, was often having her supper (she took it somewhere, every night, after the theater), in the dim, close dining room, and he used to drop in and talk to her. But she had lately married, to his great amusement, and her husband had taken her on a wedding-tour, which was to be at the same time professional. On this occasion he mounted, with rather a heavy tread, to his rooms, where (on the rickety writing-table in the parlor) he found a note from Mrs. Luna. I need not reproduce it *in extenso;* a pale reflection of it will serve. She reproached him with neglecting her, wanted to know what had become of him, whether he had grown too fashionable for a person who cared only for serious society. She accused him of having changed, and inquired as to the reason of his coldness. Was it too much to ask whether he could tell her at least in what manner she had offended him? She used to think they were so much in sympathy—he expressed her own ideas about everything so vividly. She liked intellectual companionship, and she had none now. She hoped very much he would come and see her—as he used to do six months before—the following evening; and however much she might have sinned or he might have altered, she was at least always his affectionate cousin Adeline.

"What the deuce does she want of me now?" It was with this somewhat ungracious exclamation that he tossed away his cousin Adeline's missive. The gesture might have indicated that he meant to take no notice of her; nevertheless, after a day had elapsed, he presented himself before her. He knew what she wanted of old—that is, a year ago; she had wanted him to look after her property and to be tutor to her son. He had lent himself, good-naturedly, to this desire—he was touched by so much confidence—but the experiment had speedily collapsed. Mrs. Luna's affairs were in the hands of trustees, who had complete care of them, and Ransom instantly perceived that his function would be simply to meddle in things that didn't concern him. The levity with which she had exposed him to the derision of the lawful guardians of her fortune opened his eyes to some of the dangers of cousinship; nevertheless he said to himself that he might turn an honest penny by giving an hour to two every day to the education of her little boy. But this, too, proved a brief illusion. Ransom had to find his time in the afternoon; he left his business at five o'clock and remained with his young kinsman till the hour of dinner. At the end of a few weeks he thought himself lucky in retiring without broken shins. That Newton's little nature was remarkable had often been insisted on by his mother; but it was remarkable, Ransom saw, for the absence of any of the qualities which attach a teacher to a pupil. He was in truth an insufferable child, entertaining for the Latin language a personal, physical hostility, which expressed itself in convulsions of rage. During these paroxysms he kicked furiously at every one and everything—at poor "Rannie," at his mother, at Messrs. Andrews and Stoddard, at the illustrious men of Rome, at the universe in general, to which, as he lay on his back on the carpet, he presented a pair of singularly active little heels. Mrs. Luna had a way of being present at his lessons, and when they passed, as sooner or later they were sure to, into the stage I have described, she interceded for her overwrought darling, reminded Ransom that these were the signs of an exquisite sensibility, begged that the child might be allowed to rest a little, and spent the remainder of the time in conversation with the preceptor. It came to seem to him, very soon, that he was not earning his fee; besides which, it was disagreeable to him to have pecuniary relations with a lady who had not the art of concealing from him that she liked to place him under obligations. He resigned his tutorship, and drew a long breath, having a vague feeling that he had escaped a danger. He could not have told you exactly what it was, and he had a certain sentimental, provincial respect for women which even prevented him from attempting to give a name to it in his own thoughts. He was addicted with the ladies to the old forms of address and of gallantry; he held that they were delicate, agreeable creatures, whom Providence had placed under the protection of the bearded sex; and it was not merely a humorous idea with him that whatever might be the defects of Southern gentlemen, they were at any rate remarkable for their chivalry. He was a man who still, in a slangy age, could pronounce that word with a perfectly serious face.

This boldness did not prevent him from thinking that women were essentially inferior to men, and infinitely tiresome when they declined to accept the lot which men had made for them. He had the most definite notions about their place in nature, in society, and was perfectly easy in his mind as to whether it excluded them from any proper homage. The chivalrous man paid that tax with alacrity. He admitted their rights; these consisted in a standing claim to the generosity and tenderness of the stronger race. The exercise of such feelings was full of advantage for both sexes, and they flowed most freely, of course, when

women were gracious and grateful. It may be said that he had a higher conception of politeness than most of the persons who desired the advent of female law-makers. When I have added that he hated to see women eager and argumentative, and thought that their softness and docility were the inspiration, the opportunity (the highest) of man, I shall have sketched a state of mind which will doubtless strike many readers as painfully crude. It had prevented Basil Ransom, at any rate, from putting the dots on his *i*'s, as the French say, in this gradual discovery that Mrs. Luna was making love to him. The process went on a long time before he became aware of it. He had perceived very soon that she was a tremendously familiar little woman—that she took, more rapidly than he had ever known, a high degree of intimacy for granted. But as she had seemed to him neither very fresh nor very beautiful, so he could not easily have represented to himself why she should take it into her head to marry (it would never have occurred to him to doubt that she wanted marriage), an obscure and penniless Mississippian, with womenkind of his own to provide for. He could not guess that he answered to a certain secret ideal of Mrs. Luna's, who loved the landed gentry even when landless, who adored a Southerner under any circumstances, who thought her kinsman a fine, manly, melancholy, disinterested type, and who was sure that her views of public matters, the questions of the age, the vulgar character of modern life, would meet with a perfect response in his mind. She could see by the way he talked that he was a conservative, and this was the motto inscribed upon her own silken banner. She took this unpopular line both by temperament and by reaction from her sister's "extreme" views, the sight of the dreadful people that they brought about her. In reality, Olive was distinguished and discriminating, and Adeline was the dupe of confusions in which the worse was apt to be mistaken for the better. She talked to Ransom about the inferiority of republics, the distressing persons she had met abroad in the legations of the United States, the bad manners of servants and shopkeepers in that country, the hope she entertained that "the good old families" would make a stand; but he never suspected that she cultivated these topics (her treatment of them struck him as highly comical), for the purpose of leading him to the altar, of beguiling the way. Least of all could he suppose that she would be indifferent to his want of income—a point in which he failed to do her justice; for, thinking the fact that he had remained poor a proof of delicacy in that shopkeeping age, it gave her much pleasure to reflect that, as Newton's little property was settled on him (with safeguards which showed how long-headed poor Mr. Luna had been, and large-hearted, too, since to what he left *her* no disagreeable conditions, such as eternal mourning, for instance, were attached) — that as Newton, I say, enjoyed the pecuniary independence which befitted his character, her own income was ample even for two, and she might give herself the luxury of taking a husband who should owe her something. Basil Ransom did not divine all this, but he divined that it was not for nothing that Mrs. Luna wrote him little notes every other day, that she proposed to drive him in the Park at unnatural hours, and that when he said he had his business to attend to, she replied: "Oh, a plague on your business! I am sick of that word—one hears of nothing else in America. There are ways of getting on without business, if you would only take them!" He seldom answered her notes, and he disliked extremely the way in which, in spite of her love of form and order, she attempted to clamber in at the window of one's house when one had locked the door; so that he began to interspace his visits considerably, and at last made them very rare. When I reflect on his habits of almost superstitious politeness to women, it comes over me that some very strong motive must have operated to make him give his friendly—his only too friendly—cousin the cold shoulder. Nevertheless, when he received her reproachful letter (after it had had time to work a little), he said to himself that he had perhaps been unjust and even brutal, and as he was easily touched by remorse of this kind, he took up the broken thread.

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As he sat with Mrs. Luna, in her little back drawing room, under the lamp, he felt rather more tolerant than before of the pressure she could not help putting upon him. Several months had elapsed, and he was no nearer to the sort of success he had hoped for. It stole over him gently that there was another sort, pretty visibly open to him, not so elevated nor so manly, it is true, but on which he should after all, perhaps, be able to reconcile it with his honor to fall back. Mrs. Luna had had an inspiration; for once in her life she had held her tongue. She had not made him a scene, there had been no question of an explanation; she had received him as if he had been there the day before, with the addition of a spice of mysterious melancholy. She might have made up her mind that she had lost him as what she had hoped, but that it was better than desolation to try and keep him as a friend. It was as if she wished him to see now how she tried. She was subdued and consolatory, she waited upon him, moved away a screen that intercepted the fire, remarked that he looked very tired, and rang for some tea. She made no inquiry about his affairs, never asked if he had been busy and prosperous; and this reticence struck him as unexpectedly delicate and discreet; it was as if she had guessed, by a subtle feminine faculty, that his professional career was nothing to boast of. There was a simplicity in him which permitted him to wonder whether she had not improved. The lamplight was soft, the fire crackled pleasantly, everything that surrounded him betrayed a woman's taste and touch; the place was decorated and cushioned in perfection, delightfully private and personal, the picture of a well-appointed home. Mrs. Luna had complained of the difficulties of installing one's self in America, but Ransom remembered that he had received an impression similar to this in her sister's house in Boston, and reflected that these ladies had, as a family-trait, the art of making themselves comfortable. It was better for a winter's evening than the German beer-cellar (Mrs. Luna's tea was excellent), and his hostess herself appeared tonight almost as amiable as the variety-actress. At the end of an hour he felt, I will not say almost marriageable, but almost married. Images of leisure played before him, leisure in which he saw himself covering foolscap paper with his views on several subjects, and with favorable illustrations of Southern eloquence. It became tolerably vivid to him that if editors wouldn't print one's lucubrations, it would be a comfort to feel that one was able to publish them at one's own expense.

He had a moment of almost complete illusion. Mrs. Luna had taken up her bit of crochet; she was sitting opposite to him, on the other side of the fire. Her white hands moved with little jerks as she took her stitches, and her rings flashed and twinkled in the light of the hearth. Her head fell a little to one side, exhibiting the plumpness of her chin and neck, and her dropped eyes (it gave her a little modest air), rested quietly on her work. A silence of a few moments had fallen upon their talk, and Adeline—who decidedly *had* improved —appeared also to feel the charm of it, not to wish to break it. Basil Ransom was conscious of all this, and at the same time he was vaguely engaged in a speculation. If it gave one time, if it gave one leisure, was not that in itself a high motive? Thorough study of the question he cared for most —was not the chance for *that* an infinitely desirable good? He seemed to see himself, to feel himself, in that very chair, in the evenings of the future, reading some indispensable book in the still lamplight—Mrs. Luna knew where to get such pretty mellowing shades. Should he not be able to act in that way upon the public opinion of his time, to check certain tendencies, to point out certain dangers, to indulge in much salutary criticism? Was it not one's duty to put one's self in the best conditions for such action? And as the silence continued he almost fell to musing on his duty, almost persuaded himself that the moral law commanded him to marry Mrs. Luna. She looked up presently from her work, their eyes met, and she smiled. He might have believed she had guessed what he was thinking of. This idea startled him, alarmed him a little, so that when Mrs. Luna said, with her sociable manner, "There is nothing I like so much, of a winter's night, as a cozy *tête-à-tête* by the fire. It's quite like Darby and Joan; what a pity the kettle has ceased singing!" —when she uttered these insinuating words he gave himself a little imperceptible shake, which was, however, enough to break the spell, and made no response more direct than to ask her, in a moment, in a tone of cold, mild curiosity, whether she had lately heard from her sister, and how long Miss Chancellor intended to remain in Europe.

"Well, you *have* been living in your hole!" Mrs. Luna exclaimed. "Olive came home six weeks ago. How long did you expect her to endure it?"

"I am sure I don't know; I have never been there," Ransom replied.

"Yes, that's what I like you for," Mrs. Luna remarked sweetly. "If a man is nice without it, it's such a pleasant change."

The young man started, then gave a natural laugh. "Lord, how few reasons there must be!"

"Oh, I mention that one because I can tell it. I shouldn't care to tell the others."

"I am glad you have some to fall back upon, the day I should go," Ransom went on. "I thought you thought so much of Europe."

"So I do; but it isn't everything," said Mrs. Luna, philosophically. "You had better go there with me," she added, with a certain inconsequence.

"One would go to the end of the world with so irresistible a lady!" Ransom exclaimed, falling into the tone which Mrs. Luna always found so unsatisfactory. It was a part of his Southern gallantry—his accent always came out strongly when he said anything of that sort—and it committed him to nothing in particular. She had had occasion to wish, more than once, that he wouldn't be so beastly polite, as she used to hear people say in England. She answered that she didn't care about ends, she cared about beginnings; but he didn't take up the declaration; he returned to the subject of Olive, wanted to know what she had done over there, whether she had worked them up much.

"Oh, of course, she fascinated every one," said Mrs. Luna. "With her grace and beauty, her general style, how could she help that?"

"But did she bring them round, did she swell the host that is prepared to march under her banner?"

"I suppose she saw plenty of the strong-minded, plenty of vicious old maids, and fanatics, and frumps. But I haven't the least idea what she accomplished—what they call 'wonders,' I suppose."

"Didn't you see her when she returned?" Basil Ransom asked.

"How could I see her? I can see pretty far, but I can't see all the way to Boston." And then, in explaining that it was at this port that her sister had disembarked, Mrs. Luna further inquired whether he could imagine Olive doing anything in a first-rate way, as long as there were inferior ones. "Of course she likes bad ships—Boston steamers—just as she likes common people, and red-haired hoydens, and preposterous doctrines."

Ransom was silent a moment. "Do you mean the—a—rather striking young lady whom I met in Boston a year ago last October? What was her name?—Miss Tarrant? Does Miss Chancellor like her as much as ever?"

"Mercy! don't you know she took her to Europe? It was to form *her* mind she went. Didn't I tell you that last summer? You used to come to see me then."

"Oh yes, I remember," Ransom said, rather musingly. "And did she bring her back?"

"Gracious, you don't suppose she would leave her! Olive thinks she's born to regenerate the world."

"I remember you telling me that, too. It comes back to me. Well, is her mind formed?"

"As I haven't seen it, I cannot tell you."

"Aren't you going on there to see——"

"To see whether Miss Tarrant's mind is formed?" Mrs. Luna broke in. "I will go if you would like me to. I remember your being immensely excited about her that time you met her. Don't you recollect that?"

Ransom hesitated an instant. "I can't say I do. It is too long ago."

"Yes, I have no doubt that's the way you change, about women! Poor Miss Tarrant, if she thinks she made an impression on you!"

"She won't think about such things as that, if her mind has been formed by your sister," Ransom said. "It does come back to me now, what you told me about the growth of their intimacy. And do they mean to go on living together forever?"

"I suppose so—unless some one should take it into his head to marry Verena."

"Verena—is that her name?" Ransom asked.

Mrs. Luna looked at him with a suspended needle. "Well! have you forgotten that too? You told me yourself you thought it so pretty, that time in Boston, when you walked me up the hill." Ransom declared that he remembered that walk, but didn't remember everything he had said to her; and she suggested, very satirically, that perhaps he would like to marry Verena himself—he seemed so interested in her. Ransom shook his head sadly, and said he was afraid he was not in a position to marry; whereupon Mrs. Luna asked him what he meant—did he mean (after a moment's hesitation) that he was too poor?

"Never in the world—I am very rich; I make an enormous income!" the young man exclaimed; so that, remarking his tone, and the slight flush of annoyance that rose to his face, Mrs. Luna was quick enough to judge that she had overstepped the mark. She remembered (she ought to have remembered before), that he had never taken her in the least into his confidence about his affairs. That was not the Southern way, and he was at least as proud as he was poor. In this surmise she was just; Basil Ransom would have despised himself if he had been capable of confessing to a woman that he couldn't make a living. Such questions were none of their business (their business was simply to be provided for, practice the domestic virtues, and be charmingly grateful), and there was, to his sense, something almost indecent in talking about them. Mrs. Luna felt doubly sorry for him as she perceived that he denied himself the luxury of sympathy (that is, of hers), and the vague but comprehensive sigh that passed her lips as she took up her crochet again was unusually expressive of helplessness. She said that of course she knew how great his talents were—he could do anything he wanted; and Basil Ransom wondered for a moment whether, if she were to ask him point-blank to marry her, it would be consistent with the high courtesy of a Southern

gentleman to refuse. After she should be his wife he might of course confess to her that he was too poor to marry, for in that relation even a Southern gentleman of the highest tone must sometimes unbend. But he didn't in the least long for this arrangement, and was conscious that the most pertinent sequel to her conjecture would be for him to take up his hat and walk away.

Within five minutes, however, he had come to desire to do this almost as little as to marry Mrs. Luna. He wanted to hear more about the girl who lived with Olive Chancellor. Something had revived in him—an old curiosity, an image half effaced—when he learned that she had come back to America. He had taken a wrong impression from what Mrs. Luna said, nearly a year before, about her sister's visit to Europe; he had supposed it was to be a long absence, that Miss Chancellor wanted perhaps to get the little prophetess away from her parents, possibly even away from some amorous entanglement. Then, no doubt, they wanted to study up the woman-question with the facilities that Europe would offer; he didn't know much about Europe, but he had an idea that it was a great place for facilities. His knowledge of Miss Chancellor's departure, accompanied by her young companion, had checked at the time, on Ransom's part, a certain habit of idle but none the less entertaining retrospect. His life, on the whole, had not been rich in episode, and that little chapter of his visit to his queer, clever, capricious cousin, with his evening at Miss Birdseye's, and his glimpse, repeated on the morrow, of the strange, beautiful, ridiculous, red-haired young *improvisatrice,* unrolled itself in his memory like a page of interesting fiction. The page seemed to fade, however, when he heard that the two girls had gone, for an indefinite time, to unknown lands; this carried them out of his range, spoiled the perspective, diminished their actuality; so that for several months past, with his increase of anxiety about his own affairs, and the low pitch of his spirits, he had not thought at all about Verena Tarrant. The fact that she was once more in Boston, with a certain contiguity that it seemed to imply between Boston and New York, presented itself now as important and agreeable. He was conscious that this was rather an anomaly, and his consciousness made him, had already made him, dissimulate slightly. He did not pick up his hat to go; he sat in his chair taking his chance of the tax which Mrs. Luna might lay upon his urbanity. He remembered that he had not made, as yet, any very eager inquiry about Newton, who at this late hour had succumbed to the only influence that tames the untamable and was sleeping the sleep of childhood, if not of innocence. Ransom repaired his neglect in a manner which elicited the most copious response from his hostess. The boy had had a good many tutors since Ransom gave him up, and it could not be said that his education languished. Mrs. Luna spoke with pride of the manner in which he went through them; if he did not master his lessons, he mastered his teachers, and she had the happy conviction that she gave him every advantage. Ransom's delay was diplomatic, but at the end of ten minutes he returned to the young ladies in Boston; he asked why, with their aggressive program, one hadn't begun to feel their onset, why the echoes of Miss Tarrant's eloquence hadn't reached his ears. Hadn't she come out yet in public? was she not coming to stir them up in New York? He hoped she hadn't broken down.

"She didn't seem to break down last summer, at the Female Convention," Mrs. Luna replied. "Have you forgotten that too? Didn't I tell you of the sensation she produced there, and of what I heard from Boston about it? Do you mean to say I didn't give you that 'Transcript,' with the report of her great speech? It was just before they sailed for Europe; she went off with flying colors, in a blaze of fireworks." Ransom protested that he had not heard this affair mentioned till that moment, and then, when they compared dates, they found it had taken place just after his last visit to Mrs. Luna. This, of course, gave her a chance to say that he had treated her even worse than she supposed; it had been her impression, at any rate, that they had talked together about Verena's sudden bound into fame. Apparently she confounded him with someone else, that was very possible; he was not to suppose that he occupied such a distinct place in her mind, especially when she might die twenty deaths before he came near her. Ransom demurred to the implication that Miss Tarrant was famous; if she were famous, wouldn't she be in the New York papers? He hadn't seen her there, and he had no recollection of having encountered any mention at the time (last June, was it?) of her exploits at the Female Convention. A local reputation doubtless she had, but that had been the case a year and a half before, and what was expected of her then was to become a first-class national glory. He was willing to believe that she had created some excitement in Boston, but he shouldn't attach much importance to that till one began to see her photograph in the stores. Of course, one must give her time, but he had supposed Miss Chancellor was going to put her through faster.

If he had taken a contradictious tone on purpose to draw Mrs. Luna out, he could not have elicited more of the information he desired. It was perfectly true that he had seen no reference to Verena's performances in the preceding June; there were periods when the newspapers seemed to him so idiotic that for weeks he never looked at one. He learned from Mrs. Luna that it was not Olive who had sent her the "Transcript" and in letters had added some private account of the doings at the convention to the testimony of that amiable sheet; she had been indebted for this service to a "gentleman-friend," who wrote her everything that happened in Boston, and what every one had every day for dinner. Not that it was necessary for her happiness to know; but the gentleman she spoke of didn't know what to invent to please her. A Bostonian couldn't imagine that one didn't want to know, and that was their idea of ingratiating themselves, or, at any rate, it was his, poor man. Olive would never have gone into particulars about

Verena; she regarded her sister as quite too much one of the profane, and knew Adeline couldn't understand why, when she took to herself a bosom-friend, she should have been at such pains to select her in just the most dreadful class in the community. Verena was a perfect little adventuress, and quite third-rate into the bargain; but, of course, she was a pretty girl enough, if one cared for hair of the color of cochineal. As for her people, they were too absolutely awful; it was exactly as if she, Mrs. Luna, had struck up an intimacy with the daughter of her chiropodist. It took Olive to invent such monstrosities, and to think she was doing something great for humanity when she did so; though, in spite of her wanting to turn everything over, and put the lowest highest, she could be just as contemptuous and invidious, when it came to really mixing, as if she were some grand old duchess. She must do her the justice to say that she hated the Tarrants, the father and mother; but, all the same, she let Verena run to and fro between Charles Street and the horrible hole they lived in, and Adeline knew from that gentleman who wrote so copiously that the girl now and then spent a week at a time at Cambridge. Her mother, who had been ill for some weeks, wanted her to sleep there. Mrs. Luna knew further, by her correspondent, that Verena had—or had had the winter before—a great deal of attention from gentlemen. She didn't know how she worked that into the idea that the female sex was sufficient to itself; but she had grounds for saying that this was one reason why Olive had taken her abroad. She was afraid Verena would give in to some man, and she wanted to make a break. Of course, any such giving in would be very awkward for a young woman who shrieked out on platforms that old maids were the highest type. Adeline guessed Olive had perfect control of her now, unless indeed she used the expeditions to Cambridge as a cover for meeting gentlemen. She was an artful little minx, and cared as much for the rights of women as she did for the Panama Canal; the only right of a woman she wanted was to climb up on top of something, where the men could look at her. She would stay with Olive as long as it served her purpose, because Olive, with her great respectability, could push her, and counteract the effect of her low relations, to say nothing of paying all her expenses and taking her the tour of Europe. "But, mark my words," said Mrs. Luna, "she will give Olive the greatest cut she has ever had in her life. She will run off with some lion-tamer; she will marry a circus-man!" And Mrs. Luna added that it would serve Olive Chancellor right. But she would take it hard; look out for tantrums then!

Basil Ransom's emotions were peculiar while his hostess delivered herself, in a manner at once casual and emphatic, of these rather insidious remarks. He took them all in, for they represented to him certain very interesting facts; but he perceived at the same time that Mrs. Luna didn't know what she was talking about. He had seen Verena Tarrant only twice in his life, but it was no use telling him that she was an adventuress—though, certainly, it *was* very likely she would end by giving Miss Chancellor a cut. He chuckled, with a certain grimness, as this image passed before him; it was not unpleasing, the idea that he should be avenged (for it would avenge him to know it), upon the wanton young woman who had invited him to come and see her in order simply to slap his face. But he had an odd sense of having lost something in not knowing of the other girl's appearance at the Women's Convention—a vague feeling that he had been cheated and trifled with. The complaint was idle, inasmuch as it was not probable he could have gone to Boston to listen to her; but it represented to him that he had not shared, even dimly and remotely, in an event which concerned her very closely. Why should he share, and what was more natural than that the things which concerned her closely should not concern him at all? This question came to him only as he walked home that evening; for the moment it remained quite in abeyance: therefore he was free to feel also that his imagination had been rather starved by his ignorance of the fact that she was near him again (comparatively), that she was in the dimness of the horizon (no longer beyond the curve of the globe), and yet he had not perceived it. This sense of personal loss, as I have called it, made him feel, further, that he had something to make up, to recover. He could scarcely have told you how he would go about it; but the idea, formless though it was, led him in a direction very different from the one he had been following a quarter of an hour before. As he watched it dance before him he fell into another silence, in the midst of which Mrs. Luna gave him another mystic smile. The effect of it was to make him rise to his feet; the whole landscape of his mind had suddenly been illuminated. Decidedly, it was *not* his duty to marry Mrs. Luna, in order to have means to pursue his studies; he jerked himself back, as if he had been on the point of it.

"You don't mean to say you are going already? I haven't said half I wanted to!" she exclaimed.

He glanced at the clock, saw it was not yet late, took a turn about the room, then sat down again in a different place, while she followed him with her eyes, wondering what was the matter with him. Ransom took good care not to ask her what it was she had still to say, and perhaps it was to prevent her telling him that he now began to talk, freely, quickly, in quite a new tone. He stayed half an hour longer, and made himself very agreeable. It seemed to Mrs. Luna now that he had every distinction (she had known he had most), that he was really a charming man. He abounded in conversation, till at last he took up his hat in earnest; he talked about the state of the South, its social peculiarities, the ruin wrought by the war, the dilapidated gentry, the queer types of superannuated fire-eaters, ragged and unreconciled, all the pathos and all the comedy of it, making her laugh at one moment, almost cry at another, and say to herself throughout that when he took it into his head there was no one who could make a lady's evening pass so

pleasantly. It was only afterwards that she asked herself why he had not taken it into his head till the last, so quickly. She delighted in the dilapidated gentry; her taste was completely different from her sister's, who took an interest only in the lower class, as it struggled to rise; what Adeline cared for was the fallen aristocracy (it seemed to be falling everywhere very much; was not Basil Ransom an example of it? was he not like a French *gentilhomme de province* after the Revolution? or an old monarchical *émigré* from the Languedoc?), the despoiled patriciate, I say, whose attitude was noble and touching, and toward whom one might exercise a charity as discreet as their pride was sensitive. In all Mrs. Luna's visions of herself, her discretion was the leading feature. "Are you going to let ten years elapse again before you come?" she asked, as Basil Ransom bade her good night. "You must let me know, because between this and your next visit I shall have time to go to Europe and come back. I shall take care to arrive the day before."

Instead of answering this sally, Ransom said, "Are you not going one of these days to Boston? Are you not going to pay your sister another visit?"

Mrs. Luna stared. "What good will that do *you?* Excuse my stupidity," she added; "of course, it gets me away. Thank you very much!"

"I don't want you to go away; but I want to hear more about Miss Olive."

"Why in the world? You know you loathe her!" Here, before Ransom could reply, Mrs. Luna again overtook herself. "I verily believe that by Miss Olive you mean Miss Verena!" Her eyes charged him a moment with this perverse intention; then she exclaimed, "Basil Ransom, *are* you in love with that creature?"

He gave a perfectly natural laugh, not pleading guilty, in order to practice on Mrs. Luna, but expressing the simple state of the case. "How should I be? I have seen her but twice in my life."

"If you had seen her more, I shouldn't be afraid! Fancy your wanting to pack me off to Boston!" his hostess went on. "I am in no hurry to stay with Olive again; besides, that girl takes up the whole house. You had better go there yourself."

"I should like nothing better," said Ransom.

"Perhaps you would like me to ask Verena to spend a month with me—it might be a way of attracting you to the house," Adeline went on, in the tone of exuberant provocation.

Ransom was on the point of replying that it would be a better way than any other, but he checked himself in time; he had never yet, even in joke, made so crude, so rude a speech to a lady. You only knew when he was joking with women by his superadded civility. "I beg you to believe there is nothing I would do for any woman in the world that I wouldn't do for you," he said, bending, for the last time, over Mrs. Luna's plump hand.

"I shall remember that and keep you up to it!" she cried after him, as he went. But even with this rather lively exchange of vows he felt that he had got off rather easily. He walked slowly up Fifth Avenue, into which, out of Adeline's cross-street, he had turned, by the light of a fine winter moon; and at every corner he stopped a minute, lingered in meditation, while he exhaled a soft, vague sigh. This was an unconscious, involuntary expression of relief, such as a man might utter who had seen himself on the point of being run over and yet felt that he was whole. He didn't trouble himself much to ask what had saved him; whatever it was it had produced a reaction, so that he felt rather ashamed of having found his look-out of late so blank. By the time he reached his lodgings, his ambition, his resolution, had rekindled; he had remembered that he formerly supposed he was a man of ability, that nothing particular had occurred to make him doubt it (the evidence was only negative, not positive), and that at any rate he was young enough to have another try. He whistled that night as he went to bed.

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Three weeks afterward he stood in front of Olive Chancellor's house, looking up and down the street and hesitating. He had told Mrs. Luna that he should like nothing better than to make another journey to Boston; and it was not simply because he liked it that he had come. I was on the point of saying that a happy chance had favored him, but it occurs to me that one is under no obligation to call chances by flattering epithets when they have been waited for so long. At any rate, the darkest hour is before the dawn; and a few days after that melancholy evening I have described, which Ransom spent in his German beer-cellar, before a single glass, soon emptied, staring at his future with an unremunerated eye, he found that the world appeared to have need of him yet. The "party," as he would have said (I cannot pretend that his speech was too heroic for that), for whom he had transacted business in Boston so many months before, and who had expressed at the time but a limited appreciation of his services (there had been between the lawyer and his client a divergence of judgment), observing, apparently, that they proved more fruitful than he expected, had reopened the affair and presently requested Ransom to transport himself again to the sister city. His errand demanded more time than before, and for three days he gave it his constant attention. On the fourth he found he was still detained; he should have to wait till the evening —some important papers were to be prepared. He determined to treat the interval as a holiday, and he wondered what one could do in Boston to give one's morning a festive complexion. The weather was brilliant enough to minister to any illusion, and he strolled along the streets, taking it in. In front of the Music Hall and of Tremont Temple he stopped, looking at the posters in the doorway; for was it not possible that Miss Chancellor's little friend might be just then addressing her fellow-citizens? Her name was absent, however, and this resource seemed to mock him. He knew no one in the place but Olive Chancellor, so there was no question of a visit to pay. He was perfectly resolved that he would never go near *her* again; she was doubtless a very superior being, but she had been too rough with him to tempt him further. Politeness, even a largely interpreted "chivalry," required nothing more than he had already done; he had quitted her, the other year, without telling her that she was a vixen, and that reticence was chivalrous enough. There was also Verena Tarrant, of course; he saw no reason to dissemble when he spoke of her to himself, and he allowed himself the entertainment of feeling that he should like very much to see her again. Very likely she wouldn't seem to him the same; the impression she had made upon him was due to some accident of mood or circumstance; and, at any rate, any charm she might have exhibited then had probably been obliterated by the coarsening effect of publicity and the tonic influence of his kinswoman. It will be observed that in this reasoning of Basil Ransom's the impression was freely recognized, and recognized as a phenomenon still present. The attraction might have vanished, as he said to himself, but the mental picture of it was yet vivid. The greater the pity that he couldn't call upon Verena (he called her by her name in his thoughts, it was so pretty), without calling upon Olive, and that Olive was so disagreeable as to place that effort beyond his strength. There was another consideration, with Ransom, which eminently belonged to the man; he believed that Miss Chancellor had conceived, in the course of those few hours, and in a manner that formed so absurd a sequel to her having gone out of her way to make his acquaintance, such a dislike to him that it would be odious to her to see him again within her doors; and he would have felt indelicate in taking warrant from her original invitation (before she had seen him), to inflict on her a presence which he had no reason to suppose the lapse of time had made less offensive. She had given him no sign of pardon or penitence in any of the little ways that are familiar to women—by sending him a message through her sister, or even a book, a photograph, a Christmas card, or a newspaper, by the post. He felt, in a word, not at liberty to ring at her door; he didn't know what kind of a fit the sight of his long Mississippian person would give her, and it was characteristic of him that he should wish so to spare the sensibilities of a young lady whom he had not found tender; being ever as willing to let women off easily in the particular case as he was fixed in the belief that the sex in general requires watching.

Nevertheless, he found himself, at the end of half an hour, standing on the only spot in Charles Street which had any significance for him. It had occurred to him that if he couldn't call upon Verena without calling upon Olive, he should be exempt from that condition if he called upon Mrs. Tarrant. It was not her mother, truly, who had asked him, it was the girl herself; and he was conscious, as a candid young American, that a mother is always less accessible, more guarded by social prejudice, than a daughter. But he was at a pass in which it was permissible to strain a point, and he took his way in the direction in which he knew that Cambridge lay, remembering that Miss Tarrant's invitation had reference to that quarter and that Mrs. Luna had given him further evidence. Had she not said that Verena often went back

there for visits of several days—that her mother had been ill and she gave her much care? There was nothing inconceivable in her being engaged at that hour (it was getting to be one o'clock), in one of those expeditions—nothing impossible in the chance that he might find her in Cambridge. The chance, at any rate, was worth taking; Cambridge, moreover, was worth seeing, and it was as good a way as another of keeping his holiday. It occurred to him, indeed, that Cambridge was a big place, and that he had no particular address. This reflection overtook him just as he reached Olive's house, which, oddly enough, he was obliged to pass on his way to the mysterious suburb. That is partly why he paused there; he asked himself for a moment why he shouldn't ring the bell and obtain his needed information from the servant, who would be sure to be able to give it to him. He had just dismissed this method, as of questionable taste, when he heard the door of the house open, within the deep embrasure in which, in Charles Street, the main portals are set, and which are partly occupied by a flight of steps protected at the bottom by a second door, whose upper half, in either wing, consists of a sheet of glass. It was a minute before he could see who had come out, and in that minute he had time to turn away and then to turn back again, and to wonder which of the two inmates would appear to him, or whether he should behold neither or both.

The person who had issued from the house descended the steps very slowly, as if on purpose to give him time to escape; and when at last the glass doors were divided they disclosed a little old lady. Ransom was disappointed; such an apparition was so scantily to his purpose. But the next minute his spirits rose again, for he was sure that he had seen the little old lady before. She stopped on the sidewalk and looked vaguely about her, in the manner of a person waiting for an omnibus or a streetcar; she had a dingy, loosely-habited air, as if she had worn her clothes for many years and yet was even now imperfectly acquainted with them; a large, benignant face, caged in by the glass of her spectacles, which seemed to cover it almost equally everywhere, and a fat, rusty satchel, which hung low at her side, as if it wearied her to carry it. This gave Ransom time to recognize her; he knew in Boston no such figure as that save Miss Birdseye. Her party, her person, the exalted account Miss Chancellor gave of her, had kept a very distinct place in his mind; and while she stood there in dim circumspection she came back to him as a friend of yesterday. His necessity gave a point to the reminiscences she evoked; it took him only a moment to reflect that she would be able to tell him where Verena Tarrant was at that particular time, and where, if need be, her parents lived. Her eyes rested on him, and as she saw that he was looking at her she didn't go through the ceremony (she had broken so completely with all conventions), of removing them; he evidently represented nothing to her but a sentient fellow citizen in the enjoyment of his rights, which included that of staring. Miss Birdseye's modesty had never pretended that it was not to be publicly challenged; there were so many bright new motives and ideas in the world that there might even be reasons for looking at her. When Ransom approached her and, raising his hat with a smile, said, "Shall I stop this car for you, Miss Birdseye?" she only looked at him more vaguely, in her complete failure to seize the idea that this might be simply Fame. She had trudged about the streets of Boston for fifty years, and at no period had she received that amount of attention from dark-eyed young men. She glanced, in an unprejudiced way, at the big party-colored human van which now jingled toward them from out of the Cambridge road. "Well, I should like to get into it, if it will take me home," she answered. "Is this a South End car?"

The vehicle had been stopped by the conductor, on his perceiving Miss Birdseye; he evidently recognized her as a frequent passenger. He went, however, through none of the forms of reassurance beyond remarking, "You want to get right in here—quick," but stood with his hand raised, in a threatening way, to the cord of his signal-bell.

"You must allow me the honor of taking you home, madam; I will tell you who I am," Basil Ransom said, in obedience to a rapid reflection. He helped her into the car, the conductor pressed a fraternal hand upon her back, and in a moment the young man was seated beside her, and the jingling had recommenced. At that hour of the day the car was almost empty, and they had it virtually to themselves.

"Well, I know you are someone; I don't think you belong round here," Miss Birdseye declared, as they proceeded.

"I was once at your house—on a very interesting occasion. Do you remember a party you gave, a year ago last October, to which Miss Chancellor came, and another young lady, who made a wonderful speech?"

"Oh yes! when Verena Tarrant moved us all so! There were a good many there; I don't remember all."

"I was one of them," Basil Ransom said; "I came with Miss Chancellor, who is a kind of relation of mine, and you were very good to me."

"What did I do?" asked Miss Birdseye, candidly. Then, before he could answer her, she recognized him. "I remember you now, and Olive bringing you! You're a Southern gentleman—she told me about you afterwards. You don't approve of our great struggle—you want us to be kept down." The old lady spoke with perfect mildness, as if she had long ago done with passion and resentment. Then she added, "Well, I presume we can't have the sympathy of all."

"Doesn't it look as if you had my sympathy, when I get into a car on purpose to see you home—one of the principal agitators?" Ransom inquired, laughing.

"Did you get in on purpose?"

"Quite on purpose. I am not so bad as Miss Chancellor thinks me."

"Oh, I presume you have your ideas," said Miss Birdseye. "Of course, Southerners have peculiar views. I suppose they retain more than one might think. I hope you won't ride too far—I know my way round Boston."

"Don't object to me, or think me officious," Ransom replied. "I want to ask you something."

Miss Birdseye looked at him again. "Oh yes, I place you now; you conversed some with Doctor Prance."

"To my great edification!" Ransom exclaimed. "And I hope Doctor Prance is well."

"She looks after every one's health but her own," said Miss Birdseye, smiling. "When I tell her that, she says she hasn't got any to look after. She says she's the only woman in Boston that hasn't got a doctor. She was determined she wouldn't be a patient, and it seemed as if the only way not to be one was to be a doctor. She is trying to make me sleep; that's her principal occupation."

"Is it possible you don't sleep yet?" Ransom asked, almost tenderly.

"Well, just a little. But by the time I get to sleep I have to get up. I can't sleep when I want to live."

"You ought to come down South," the young man suggested. "In that languid air you would doze deliciously!"

"Well, I don't want to be languid," said Miss Birdseye. "Besides, I have been down South, in the old times, and I can't say they let me sleep very much; they were always round after me!"

"Do you mean on account of the negroes?"

"Yes, I couldn't think of anything else then. I carried them the Bible."

Ransom was silent a moment; then he said, in a tone which evidently was carefully considerate, "I should like to hear all about that!"

"Well, fortunately, we are not required now; we are required for something else." And Miss Birdseye looked at him with a wandering, tentative humor, as if he would know what she meant.

"You mean for the other slaves!" he exclaimed, with a laugh. "You can carry them all the Bibles you want."

"I want to carry them the Statute-book; that must be our Bible now."

Ransom found himself liking Miss Birdseye very much, and it was quite without hypocrisy or a tinge too much of the local quality in his speech that he said: "Wherever you go, madam, it will matter little what you carry. You will always carry your goodness."

For a minute she made no response. Then she murmured: "That's the way Olive Chancellor told me you talked."

"I am afraid she has told you little good of me."

"Well, I am sure she thinks she is right."

"Thinks it?" said Ransom. "Why, she knows it, with supreme certainty! By the way, I hope she is well."

Miss Birdseye stared again. "Haven't you seen her? Are you not visiting?"

"Oh no, I am not visiting! I was literally passing her house when I met you."

"Perhaps you live here now," said Miss Birdseye. And when he had corrected this impression, she added, in a tone which showed with what positive confidence he had now inspired her, "Hadn't you better drop in?"

"It would give Miss Chancellor no pleasure," Basil Ransom rejoined. "She regards me as an enemy in the camp."

"Well, she is very brave."

"Precisely. And I am very timid."

"Didn't you fight once?"

"Yes; but it was in such a good cause!"

Ransom meant this allusion to the great Secession and, by comparison, to the attitude of the resisting male (laudable even as that might be), to be decently jocular; but Miss Birdseye took it very seriously, and sat there for a good while as speechless as if she meant to convey that she had been going on too long now to be able to discuss the propriety of the late rebellion. The young man felt that he had silenced her, and he was very sorry; for, with all deference to the distinterested Southern attitude toward the unprotected female, what he had got into the car with her for was precisely to make her talk. He had wished for general, as well as for particular, news of Verena Tarrant; it was a topic on which he had proposed to draw Miss Birdseye out. He preferred not to broach it himself, and he waited awhile for another opening. At last, when he was on the point of exposing himself by a direct inquiry (he reflected that the exposure would in any case not be long averted), she anticipated him by saying, in a manner which showed that her thoughts had continued in the same train, "I wonder very much that Miss Tarrant didn't affect you that evening!"

"Ah, but she did!" Ransom said, with alacrity. "I thought her very charming!"

"Didn't you think her very reasonable?"

"God forbid, madam! I consider women have no business to be reasonable."

His companion turned upon him, slowly and mildly, and each of her glasses, in her aspect of reproach,

had the glitter of an enormous tear. "Do you regard us, then, simply as lovely baubles?"

The effect of this question, as coming from Miss Birdseye, and referring in some degree to her own venerable identity, was such as to move him to irresistible laughter. But he controlled himself quickly enough to say, with genuine expression, "I regard you as the dearest thing in life, the only thing which makes it worth living!"

"Worth living for—you! But for us?" suggested Miss Birdseye.

"It's worth any woman's while to be admired as I admire you. Miss Tarrant, of whom we were speaking, affected me, as you say, in this way—that I think more highly still, if possible, of the sex which produced such a delightful young lady."

"Well, we think everything of her here," said Miss Birdseye. "It seems as if it were a real gift."

"Does she speak often—is there any chance of my hearing her now?"

"She raises her voice a good deal in the places round—like Framingham and Billerica. It seems as if she were gathering strength, just to break over Boston like a wave. In fact she did break, last summer. She is a growing power since her great success at the convention."

"Ah! her success at the convention was very great?" Ransom inquired, putting discretion into his voice.

Miss Birdseye hesitated a moment, in order to measure her response by the bounds of righteousness. "Well," she said, with the tenderness of a long retrospect, "I have seen nothing like it since I last listened to Eliza P. Moseley."

"What a pity she isn't speaking somewhere tonight!" Ransom exclaimed.

"Oh, tonight she's out in Cambridge. Olive Chancellor mentioned that."

"Is she making a speech there?"

"No; she's visiting her home."

"I thought her home was in Charles Street?"

"Well, no; that's her residence—her principal one—since she became so united to your cousin. Isn't Miss Chancellor your cousin?"

"We don't insist on the relationship," said Ransom, smiling. "Are they very much united, the two young ladies?"

"You would say so if you were to see Miss Chancellor when Verena rises to eloquence. It's as if the chords were strung across her own heart; she seems to vibrate, to echo with every word. It's a very close and very beautiful tie, and we think everything of it here. They will work together for a great good!"

"I hope so," Ransom remarked. "But in spite of it Miss Tarrant spends a part of her time with her father and mother."

"Yes, she seems to have something for everyone. If you were to see her at home, you would think she was all the daughter. She leads a lovely life!" said Miss Birdseye.

"See her at home? That's exactly what I want!" Ransom rejoined, feeling that if he was to come to this he needn't have had scruples at first. "I haven't forgotten that she invited me, when I met her."

"Oh, of course she attracts many visitors," said Miss Birdseye, limiting her encouragement to this statement.

"Yes; she must be used to admirers. And where, in Cambridge, do her family live?"

"Oh, it's on one of those little streets that don't seem to have very much of a name. But they do call it—they do call it——" she meditated, audibly.

This process was interrupted by an abrupt allocution from the conductor. "I guess you change here for *your* place. You want one of them blue cars."

The good lady returned to a sense of the situation, and Ransom helped her out of the vehicle, with the aid, as before, of a certain amount of propulsion from the conductor. Her road branched off to the right, and she had to wait on the corner of a street, there being as yet no blue car within hail. The corner was quiet and the day favorable to patience—a day of relaxed rigor and intense brilliancy. It was as if the touch of the air itself were gloved, and the street-coloring had the richness of a superficial thaw. Ransom, of course, waited with his philanthropic companion, though she now protested more vigorously against the idea that a gentleman from the South should pretend to teach an old abolitionist the mysteries of Boston. He promised to leave her when he should have consigned her to the blue car; and meanwhile they stood in the sun, with their backs against an apothecary's window, and she tried again, at his suggestion, to remember the name of Doctor Tarrant's street. "I guess if you ask for Doctor Tarrant, anyone can tell you," she said; and then suddenly the address came to her —the residence of the mesmeric healer was in Monadnoc Place.

"But you'll have to ask for that, so it comes to the same," she went on. After this she added, with a friendliness more personal, "Ain't you going to see your cousin too?"

"Not if I can help it!"

Miss Birdseye gave a little ineffectual sigh. "Well, I suppose every one must act out their ideal. That's what Olive Chancellor does. She's a very noble character."

"Oh yes, a glorious nature."

"You know their opinions are just the same—hers and Verena's," Miss Birdseye placidly continued. "So

why should you make a distinction?"

"My dear madam," said Ransom, "does a woman consist of nothing but her opinions? I like Miss Tarrant's lovely face better, to begin with."

"Well, she *is* pretty-looking." And Miss Birdseye gave another sigh, as if she had had a theory submitted to her—that one about a lady's opinions—which, with all that was unfamiliar and peculiar lying behind it, she was really too old to look into much. It might have been the first time she really felt her age. "There's a blue car," she said, in a tone of mild relief.

"It will be some moments before it gets here. Moreover, I don't believe that at bottom they *are* Miss Tarrant's opinions," Ransom added.

"You mustn't think she hasn't a strong hold of them," his companion exclaimed, more briskly. "If you think she is not sincere, you are very much mistaken. Those views are just her life."

"Well, *she* may bring me round to them," said Ransom, smiling.

Miss Birdseye had been watching her blue car, the advance of which was temporarily obstructed. At this, she transferred her eyes to him, gazing at him solemnly out of the pervasive window of her spectacles. "Well, I shouldn't wonder if she did! Yes, that will be a good thing. I don't see how you can help being a good deal shaken by her. She has acted on so many."

"I see; no doubt she will act on me." Then it occurred to Ransom to add: "By the way, Miss Birdseye, perhaps you will be so kind as not to mention this meeting of ours to my cousin, in case of your seeing her again. I have a perfectly good conscience in not calling upon her, but I shouldn't like her to think that I announced my slighting intention all over the town. I don't want to offend her, and she had better not know that I have been in Boston. If you don't tell her, no one else will."

"Do you wish me to conceal——?" murmured Miss Birdseye, panting a little.

"No, I don't want you to conceal anything. I only want you to let this incident pass—to say nothing."

"Well, I never did anything of that kind."

"Of what kind?" Ransom was half vexed, half touched by her inability to enter into his point of view, and her resistance made him hold to his idea the more. "It is very simple, what I ask of you. You are under no obligation to tell Miss Chancellor everything that happens to you, are you?"

His request seemed still something of a shock to the poor old lady's candor. "Well, I see her very often, and we talk a great deal. And then—won't Verena tell her?"

"I have thought of that—but I hope not."

"She tells her most everything. Their union is so close."

"She won't want her to be wounded," Ransom said, ingeniously.

"Well, you *are* considerate." And Miss Birdseye continued to gaze at him. "It's a pity you can't sympathize."

"As I tell you, perhaps Miss Tarrant will bring me round. You have before you a possible convert," Ransom went on, without, I fear, putting up the least little prayer to heaven that his dishonesty might be forgiven.

"I should be very happy to think that—after I have told you her address in this secret way." A smile of infinite mildness glimmered in Miss Birdseye's face, and she added: "Well, I guess that will be your fate. She *has* affected so many. I would keep very quiet if I thought that. Yes, she will bring you round."

"I will let you know as soon as she does," Basil Ransom said. "Here is your car at last."

"Well, I believe in the victory of the truth. I won't say anything." And she suffered the young man to lead her to the car, which had now stopped at their corner.

"I hope very much I shall see you again," he remarked, as they went.

"Well, I am always round the streets, in Boston." And while, lifting and pushing, he was helping again to insert her into the oblong receptacle, she turned a little and repeated, "She *will* affect you! If that's to be your secret, I will keep it," Ransom heard her subjoin. He raised his hat and waved her a farewell, but she didn't see him; she was squeezing further into the car and making the discovery that this time it was full and there was no seat for her. Surely, however, he said to himself, every man in the place would offer his own to such an innocent old dear.

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A little more than an hour after this he stood in the parlor of Doctor Tarrant's suburban residence, in Monadnoc Place. He had induced a juvenile maid-servant, by an appeal somewhat impassioned, to let the ladies know that he was there; and she had returned, after a long absence, to say that Miss Tarrant would come down to him in a little while. He possessed himself, according to his wont, of the nearest book (it lay on the table, with an old magazine and a little japanned tray containing Tarrant's professional cards —his denomination as a mesmeric healer), and spent ten minutes in turning it over. It was a biography of Mrs. Ada T. P. Foat, the celebrated trance-lecturer, and was embellished by a portrait representing the lady with a surprised expression and innumerable ringlets. Ransom said to himself, after reading a few pages, that much ridicule had been cast upon Southern literature; but if that was a fair specimen of Northern!—and he threw it back upon the table with a gesture almost as contemptuous as if he had not known perfectly, after so long a residence in the North, that it was not, while he wondered whether this was the sort of thing Miss Tarrant had been brought up on. There was no other book to be seen, and he remembered to have read the magazine; so there was finally nothing for him, as the occupants of the house failed still to appear, but to stare before him, into the bright, bare, common little room, which was so hot that he wished to open a window, and of which an ugly, undraped cross-light seemed to have taken upon itself to reveal the poverty. Ransom, as I have mentioned, had not a high standard of comfort, and noticed little, usually, how people's houses were furnished—it was only when they were very pretty that he observed; but what he saw while he waited at Doctor Tarrant's made him say to himself that it was no wonder Verena liked better to live with Olive Chancellor. He even began to wonder whether it were for the sake of that superior softness she had cultivated Miss Chancellor's favor, and whether Mrs. Luna had been right about her being mercenary and insincere. So many minutes elapsed before she appeared that he had time to remember he really knew nothing to the contrary, as well as to consider the oddity (so great when one did consider it), of his coming out to Cambridge to see her, when he had only a few hours in Boston to spare, a year and a half after she had given him her very casual invitation. She had not refused to receive him, at any rate; she was free to, if it didn't please her. And not only this, but she was apparently making herself fine in his honor, inasmuch as he heard a rapid footstep move to and fro above his head, and even, through the slightness which in Monadnoc Place did service for an upper floor, the sound of drawers and presses opened and closed. Some one was "flying round," as they said in Mississippi. At last the stairs creaked under a light tread, and the next moment a brilliant person came into the room.

His reminiscence of her had been very pretty; but now that she had developed and matured, the little prophetess was prettier still. Her splendid hair seemed to shine; her cheek and chin had a curve which struck him by its fineness; her eyes and lips were full of smiles and greetings. She had appeared to him before as a creature of brightness, but now she lighted up the place, she irradiated, she made everything that surrounded her of no consequence; dropping upon the shabby sofa with an effect as charming as if she had been a nymph sinking on a leopard-skin, and with the native sweetness of her voice forcing him to listen till she spoke again. It was not long before he perceived that this added luster was simply success; she was young and tender still, but the sound of a great applauding audience had been in her ears; it formed an element in which she felt buoyant and floated. Still, however, her glance was as pure as it was direct, and that fantastic fairness hung about her which had made an impression on him of old, and which reminded him of unworldly places—he didn't know where—convent-cloisters or vales of Arcady. At that other time she had been party-colored and bedizened, and she had always an air of costume, only now her costume was richer and more chastened. It was her line, her condition, part of her expression. If at Miss Birdseye's, and afterwards in Charles Street, she might have been a ropedancer, today she made a "scene" of the mean little room in Monadnoc Place, such a scene as a prima donna makes of daubed canvas and dusty boards. She addressed Basil Ransom as if she had seen him the other week and his merits were fresh to her, though she let him, while she sat smiling at him, explain in his own rather ceremonious way why it was he had presumed to call upon her on so slight an acquaintance—on an invitation which she herself had had more than time to forget. His explanation, as a finished and satisfactory thing, quite broke down; there was no more impressive reason than that he had simply wished to see her. He became aware that this motive loomed large, and that her listening smile, innocent as it was, in the Arcadian manner, of mockery, seemed to accuse him of not having the courage of his inclination. He had alluded especially to their meeting at Miss Chancellor's; there it was that she had told him she should be glad to see him in her home.

"Oh yes, I remember perfectly, and I remember quite as well seeing you at Miss Birdseye's the night

before. I made a speech—don't you remember? That was delightful."

"It was delightful indeed," said Basil Ransom.

"I don't mean my speech; I mean the whole thing. It was then I made Miss Chancellor's acquaintance. I don't know whether you know how we work together. She has done so much for me."

"Do you still make speeches?" Ransom asked, conscious, as soon as he had uttered it, that the question was below the mark.

"Still? Why, I should hope so; it's all I'm good for! It's my life—or it's going to be. And it's Miss Chancellor's too. We are determined to do something."

"And does she make speeches too?"

"Well, she makes mine—or the best part of them. She tells me what to say—the real things, the strong things. It's Miss Chancellor as much as me!" said the singular girl, with a generous complacency which was yet half ludicrous.

"I should like to hear you again," Basil Ransom rejoined.

"Well, you must come some night. You will have plenty of chances. We are going on from triumph to triumph."

Her brightness, her self-possession, her air of being a public character, her mixture of the girlish and the comprehensive, startled and confounded her visitor, who felt that if he had come to gratify his curiosity he should be in danger of going away still more curious than satiated. She added in her gay, friendly, trustful tone—the tone of facile intercourse, the tone in which happy, flower-crowned maidens may have talked to sunburnt young men in the golden age —"I am very familiar with your name; Miss Chancellor has told me all about you."

"All about me?" Ransom raised his black eyebrows. "How could she do that? She doesn't know anything about me!"

"Well, she told me you are a great enemy to our movement. Isn't that true? I think you expressed some unfavorable idea that day I met you at her house."

"If you regard me as an enemy, it's very kind of you to receive me."

"Oh, a great many gentlemen call," Verena said, calmly and brightly. "Some call simply to inquire. Some call because they have heard of me, or been present on some occasion when I have moved them. Everyone is so interested."

"And you have been in Europe," Ransom remarked, in a moment.

"Oh yes, we went over to see if they were in advance. We had a magnificent time—we saw all the leaders."

"The leaders?" Ransom repeated.

"Of the emancipation of our sex. There are gentlemen there, as well as ladies. Olive had splendid introductions in all countries, and we conversed with all the earnest people. We heard much that was suggestive. And as for Europe!" —and the young lady paused, smiling at him and ending in a happy sigh, as if there were more to say on the subject than she could attempt on such short notice.

"I suppose it's very attractive," said Ransom, encouragingly.

"It's just a dream!"

"And did you find that they were in advance?"

"Well, Miss Chancellor thought they were. She was surprised at some things we observed, and concluded that perhaps she hadn't done the Europeans justice—she has got such an open mind, it's as wide as the sea!—while I incline to the opinion that on the whole *we* make the better show. The state of the movement there reflects their general culture, and their general culture is higher than ours (I mean taking the term in its broadest sense). On the other hand, the *special* condition—moral, social, personal—of our sex seems to me to be superior in this country; I mean regarded in relation—in proportion as it were—to the social phase at large. I must add that we did see some noble specimens over there. In England we met some lovely women, highly cultivated, and of immense organizing power. In France we saw some wonderful, contagious types; we passed a delightful evening with the celebrated Marie Verneuil; she was released from prison, you know, only a few weeks before. Our total impression was that it is only a question of time—the future is ours. But everywhere we heard one cry—'How long, O Lord, how long?' "

Basil Ransom listened to this considerable statement with a feeling which, as the current of Miss Tarrant's facile utterance flowed on, took the form of an hilarity charmed into stillness by the fear of losing something. There was indeed a sweet comicality in seeing this pretty girl sit there and, in answer to a casual, civil inquiry, drop into oratory as a natural thing. Had she forgotten where she was, and did she take him for a full house? She had the same turns and cadences, almost the same gestures, as if she had been on the platform; and the great queerness of it was that, with such a manner, she should escape being odious. She was not odious, she was delightful; she was not dogmatic, she was genial. No wonder she was a success, if she speechified as a bird sings! Ransom could see, too, from her easy lapse, how the lecture-tone was the thing in the world with which, by education, by association, she was most familiar. He didn't know what to make of her; she was an astounding young phenomenon. The other time came back to him afresh, and how she had stood up at Miss Birdseye's; it occurred to him that an element, here, had been

wanting. Several moments after she had ceased speaking he became conscious that the expression of his face presented a perceptible analogy to a broad grin. He changed his posture, saying the first thing that came into his head. "I presume you do without your father now."

"Without my father?"

"To set you going, as he did that time I heard you."

"Oh, I see; you thought I had begun a lecture!" And she laughed, in perfect good humor. "They tell me I speak as I talk, so I suppose I talk as I speak. But you mustn't put me on what I saw and heard in Europe. That's to be the title of an address I am now preparing, by the way. Yes, I don't depend on father any more," she went on, while Ransom's sense of having said too sarcastic a thing was deepened by her perfect indifference to it. "He finds his patients draw off about enough, anyway. But I owe him everything; if it hadn't been for him, no one would ever have known I had a gift—not even myself. He started me so, once for all, that I now go alone."

"You go beautifully," said Ransom, wanting to say something agreeable, and even respectfully tender, to her, but troubled by the fact that there was nothing he could say that didn't sound rather like chaff. There was no resentment in her, however, for in a moment she said to him, as quickly as it occurred to her, in the manner of a person repairing an accidental omission, "It was very good of you to come so far."

This was a sort of speech it was never safe to make to Ransom; there was no telling what retribution it might entail. "Do you suppose any journey is too great, too wearisome, when it's a question of so great a pleasure?" On this occasion it was not worse than that.

"Well, people *have* come from other cities," Verena answered, not with pretended humility, but with pretended pride. "Do you know Cambridge?"

"This is the first time I have ever been here."

"Well, I suppose you have heard of the university; it's so celebrated."

"Yes—even in Mississippi. I suppose it's very fine."

"I presume it is," said Verena; "but you can't expect me to speak with much admiration of an institution of which the doors are closed to our sex."

"Do you then advocate a system of education in common?"

"I advocate equal rights, equal opportunities, equal privileges. So does Miss Chancellor," Verena added, with just a perceptible air of feeling that her declaration needed support.

"Oh, I thought what she wanted was simply a different inequality—simply to turn out the men altogether," Ransom said.

"Well, she thinks we have great arrears to make up. I do tell her, sometimes, that what she desires is not only justice but vengeance. I think she admits that," Verena continued, with a certain solemnity. The subject, however, held her but an instant, and before Ransom had time to make any comment, she went on, in a different tone : "You don't mean to say you live in Mississippi *now?* Miss Chancellor told me when you were in Boston before, that you had located in New York." She persevered in this reference to himself, for when he had assented to her remark about New York, she asked him whether he had quite given up the South.

"Given it up—the poor, dear, desolate old South? Heaven forbid!" Basil Ransom exclaimed.

She looked at him for a moment with an added softness. "I presume it is natural you should love your home. But I am afraid you think I don't love mine much; I have been here—for so long—so little. Miss Chancellor *has* absorbed me—there is no doubt about that. But it's a pity I wasn't with her today." Ransom made no answer to this; he was incapable of telling Miss Tarrant that if she had been he would not have called upon her. It was not, indeed, that he was not incapable of hypocrisy, for when she had asked him if he had seen his cousin the night before, and he had replied that he hadn't seen her at all, and she had exclaimed with a candor which the next minute made her blush, "Ah, you don't mean to say you haven't forgiven her!"—after this he put on a look of innocence sufficient to carry off the inquiry, "Forgiven her for what?"

Verena colored at the sound of her own words. "Well, I could see how much she felt, that time at her house."

"What did she feel?" Basil Ransom asked, with the natural provokingness of a man.

I know not whether Verena was provoked, but she answered with more spirit than sequence: "Well, you know you *did* pour contempt on us, ever so much; I could see how it worked Olive up. Are you not going to see her at all?"

"Well, I shall think about that; I am here only for three or four days," said Ransom, smiling as men smile when they are perfectly unsatisfactory.

It is very possible that Verena was provoked, inaccessible as she was, in a general way, to irritation; for she rejoined in a moment, with a little deliberate air: "Well, perhaps it's as well you shouldn't go, if you haven't changed at all."

"I haven't changed at all," said the young man, smiling still, with his elbows on the arms of his chair, his shoulders pushed up a little, and his thin brown hands interlocked in front of him.

"Well, I have had visitors who were quite opposed!" Verena announced, as if such news could not

possibly alarm her. Then she added, "How then did you know I was out here?"

"Miss Birdseye told me."

"Oh, I am so glad you went to see *her!"* the girl cried, speaking again with the impetuosity of a moment before.

"I didn't go to see her. I met her in the street, just as she was leaving Miss Chancellor's door. I spoke to her, and accompanied her some distance. I passed that way because I knew it was the direct way to Cambridge—from the Common—and I was coming out to see you anyway—on the chance."

"On the chance?" Verena repeated.

"Yes; Mrs. Luna, in New York, told me you were sometimes here, and I wanted, at any rate, to make the attempt to find you."

It may be communicated to the reader that it was very agreeable to Verena to learn that her visitor had made this arduous pilgrimage (for she knew well enough how people in Boston regarded a winter journey to the academic suburb) with only half the prospect of a reward; but her pleasure was mixed with other feelings, or at least with the consciousness that the whole situation was rather less simple than the elements of her life had been hitherto. There was the germ of disorder in this invidious distinction which Mr. Ransom had suddenly made between Olive Chancellor, who was related to him by blood, and herself, who had never been related to him in any way whatever. She knew Olive by this time well enough to wish not to reveal it to her, and yet it would be something quite new for her to undertake to conceal such an incident as her having spent an hour with Mr. Ransom during a flying visit he had made to Boston. She had spent hours with other gentlemen, whom Olive didn't see; but that was different, because her friend knew about her doing it and didn't care, in regard to the persons —didn't care, that is, as she would care in this case. It was vivid to Verena's mind that now Olive *would* care. She had talked about Mr. Burrage, and Mr. Pardon, and even about some gentlemen in Europe, and she had not (after the first few days, a year and a half before) talked about Mr. Ransom.

Nevertheless there were reasons, clear to Verena's view, for wishing either that he would go and see Olive or would keep away from *her;* and the responsibility of treating the fact that he had not so kept away as a secret seemed the greater, perhaps, in the light of this other fact, that so far as simply seeing Mr. Ransom went—why, she quite liked it. She had remembered him perfectly after their two former meetings, superficial as their contact then had been; she had thought of him at moments and wondered whether she should like him if she were to know him better. Now, at the end of twenty minutes, she did know him better, and found that he had rather a curious, but still a pleasant way. There he was, at any rate, and she didn't wish his call to be spoiled by any uncomfortable implication of consequences. So she glanced off, at the touch of Mrs. Luna's name; it seemed to afford relief. "Oh yes, Mrs. Luna—isn't she fascinating?"

Ransom hesitated a little. "Well, no, I don't think she is."

"You ought to like her—she hates our movement!" And Verena asked, further, numerous questions about the brilliant Adeline; whether he saw her often, whether she went out much, whether she was admired in New York, whether he thought her very handsome. He answered to the best of his ability, but soon made the reflection that he had not come out to Monadnoc Place to talk about Mrs. Luna; in consequence of which, to change the subject (as well as to acquit himself of a social duty), he began to speak of Verena's parents, to express regret that Mrs. Tarrant had been sick, and fear that he was not to have the pleasure of seeing her. "She is a great deal better," Verena said; "but she's lying down; she lies down a great deal when she has got nothing else to do. Mother's very peculiar," she added in a moment; "she lies down when she feels well and happy, and when she's sick she walks about—she roams all round the house. If you hear her on the stairs a good deal, you can be pretty sure she's very bad. She'll be very much interested to hear about you after you have left."

Ransom glanced at his watch. "I hope I am not staying too long—that I am not taking you away from her."

"Oh no; she likes visitors, even when she can't see them. If it didn't take her so long to rise, she would have been down here by this time. I suppose you think she has missed me, since I have been so absorbed. Well, so she has, but she knows it's for my good. She would make any sacrifice for affection."

The fancy suddenly struck Ransom of asking, in response to this, "And you? would you make any?"

Verena gave him a bright natural stare. "Any sacrifice for affection?" She thought a moment, and then she said: "I don't think I have a right to say, because I have never been asked. I don't remember ever to have had to make a sacrifice—not an important one."

"Lord! you must have had a happy life!"

"I have been very fortunate, I know that. I don't know what to do when I think how some women—how most women—suffer. But I must not speak of that," she went on, with her smile coming back to her. "If you oppose our movement, you won't want to hear of the suffering of women!"

"The suffering of women is the suffering of all humanity," Ransom returned. "Do you think any movement is going to stop that—or all the lectures from now to doomsday? We are born to suffer—and to bear it, like decent people."

"Oh, I adore heroism!" Verena interposed.

"And as for women," Ransom went on, "they have one source of happiness that is closed to us—the consciousness that their presence here below lifts half the load of *our* suffering."

Verena thought this very graceful, but she was not sure it was not rather sophistical; she would have liked to have Olive's judgment upon it. As that was not possible for the present, she abandoned the question (since learning that Mr. Ransom had passed over Olive, to come to her, she had become rather fidgety), and inquired of the young man, irrelevantly, whether he knew any one else in Cambridge.

"Not a creature; as I tell you, I have never been here before. Your image alone attracted me; this charming interview will be henceforth my only association with the place."

"It's a pity you couldn't have a few more," said Verena, musingly.

"A few more interviews? I should be unspeakably delighted!"

"A few more associations. Did you see the colleges as you came?"

"I had a glimpse of a large enclosure, with some big buildings. Perhaps I can look at them better as I go back to Boston."

"Oh yes, you ought to see them—they have improved so much of late. The inner life, of course, is the greatest interest, but there is some fine architecture, if you are not familiar with Europe." She paused a moment, looking at him with an eye that seemed to brighten, and continued quickly, like a person who had collected herself for a little jump, "If you would like to walk round a little, I shall be very glad to show you."

"To walk round—with you to show me?" Ransom repeated. "My dear Miss Tarrant, it would be the greatest privilege—the greatest happiness—of my life. What a delightful idea—what an ideal guide!"

Verena got up; she would go and put on her hat; he must wait a little. Her offer had a frankness and friendliness which gave him a new sensation, and he could not know that as soon as she had made it (though she had hesitated too, with a moment of intense reflection), she seemed to herself strangely reckless. An impulse pushed her; she obeyed it with her eyes open. She felt as a girl feels when she commits her first conscious indiscretion. She had done many things before which many people would have called indiscreet, but that quality had not even faintly belonged to them in her own mind; she had done them in perfect good faith and with a remarkable absence of palpitation. This superficially ingenuous proposal to walk around the colleges with Mr. Ransom had really another color; it deepened the ambiguity of her position, by reason of a prevision which I shall presently mention. If Olive was not to know that she had seen him, this extension of their interview would double her secret. And yet, while she saw it grow—this monstrous little mystery—she couldn't feel sorry that she was going out with Olive's cousin. As I have already said, she had become nervous. She went to put on her hat, but at the door of the room she stopped, turned round, and presented herself to her visitor with a small spot in either cheek, which had appeared there within the instant. "I have suggested this, because it seems to me I ought to do something for you—in return," she said. "It's nothing, simply sitting there with me. And we haven't got anything else. This is our only hospitality. And the day seems so splendid."

The modesty, the sweetness, of this little explanation, with a kind of intimated desire, constituting almost an appeal, for rightness, which seemed to pervade it, left a fragrance in the air after she had vanished. Ransom walked up and down the room, with his hands in his pockets, under the influence of it, without taking up even once the book about Mrs. Foat. He occupied the time in asking himself by what perversity of fate or of inclination such a charming creature was ranting upon platforms and living in Olive Chancellor's pocket, or how a ranter and sycophant could possibly be so engaging. And she was so disturbingly beautiful, too. This last fact was not less evident when she came down arranged for their walk. They left the house, and as they proceeded he remembered that he had asked himself earlier how he could do honor to such a combination of leisure and ethereal mildness as he had waked up to that morning—a mildness that seemed the very breath of his own latitude. This question was answered now; to do exactly what he was doing at that moment was an observance sufficiently festive.

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They passed through two or three small, short streets, which, with their little wooden houses, with still more wooden dooryards, looked as if they had been constructed by the nearest carpenter and his boy—a sightless, soundless, interspaced, embryonic region—and entered a long avenue which, fringed on either side with fresh villas, offering themselves trustfully to the public, had the distinction of a wide pavement of neat red brick. The new paint on the square detached houses shone afar off in the transparent air: they had, on top, little cupolas and belvederes, in front a pillared piazza, made bare by the indoor life of winter, on either side a bow-window or two, and everywhere an embellishment of scallops, brackets, cornices, wooden flourishes. They stood, for the most part, on small eminences, lifted above the impertinence of hedge or paling, well up before the world, with all the good conscience which in many cases came, as Ransom saw (and he had noticed the same ornament when he traversed with Olive the quarter of Boston inhabited by Miss Birdseye), from a silvered number, affixed to the glass above the door, in figures huge enough to be read by the people who, in the periodic horsecars, traveled along the middle of the avenue. It was to these glittering badges that many of the houses on either side owed their principal identity. One of the horsecars now advanced in the straight, spacious distance; it was almost the only object that animated the prospect, which, in its large cleanness, its implication of strict business habits on the part of all the people who were not there, Ransom thought very impressive. As he went on with Verena he asked her about the Women's Convention, the year before; whether it had accomplished much work and she had enjoyed it.

"What do you care about the work it accomplished?" said the girl. "You don't take any interest in that."

"You mistake my attitude. I don't like it, but I greatly fear it."

In answer to this Verena gave a free laugh. "I don't believe you fear much!"

"The bravest men have been afraid of women. Won't you even tell me whether you enjoyed it? I am told you made an immense sensation there—that you leaped into fame."

Verena never waved off an allusion to her ability, her eloquence; she took it seriously, without any flutter or protest, and had no more manner about it than if it concerned the goddess Minerva. "I believe I attracted considerable attention; of course, that's what Olive wants—it paves the way for future work. I have no doubt I reached many that wouldn't have been reached otherwise. They think that's my great use—to take hold of the outsiders, as it were; of those who are prejudiced or thoughtless, or who don't care about anything unless it's amusing. I wake up the attention."

"That's the class to which I belong," Ransom said. "Am I not an outsider? I wonder whether you would have reached me—or waked up my attention!"

Verena was silent awhile, as they walked; he heard the light click of her boots on the smooth bricks. Then—"I think I *have* waked it up a little," she replied, looking straight before her.

"Most assuredly! You have made me wish tremendously to contradict you."

"Well, that's a good sign."

"I suppose it was very exciting—your convention," Ransom went on, in a moment; "the sort of thing you would miss very much if you were to return to the ancient fold."

"The ancient fold, you say very well, where women were slaughtered like sheep! Oh, last June, for a week, we just quivered! There were delegates from every State and every city; we lived in a crowd of people and of ideas; the heat was intense, the weather magnificent, and great thoughts and brilliant sayings flew round like darting fireflies. Olive had six celebrated, high-minded women staying in her house—two in a room; and in the summer evenings we sat in the open windows, in her parlor, looking out on the bay, with the lights gleaming in the water, and talked over the doings of the morning, the speeches, the incidents, the fresh contributions to the cause. We had some tremendously earnest discussions, which it would have been a benefit to you to hear, or any man who doesn't think that we can rise to the highest point. Then we had some refreshment—we consumed quantities of ice cream!" said Verena, in whom the note of gaiety alternated with that of earnestness, almost of exaltation, in a manner which seemed to Basil Ransom absolutely and fascinatingly original. "Those were great nights!" she added, between a laugh and a sigh.

Her description of the convention put the scene before him vividly; he seemed to see the crowded, overheated hall, which he was sure was filled with carpetbaggers, to hear flushed women, with loosened bonnet-strings, forcing thin voices into ineffectual shrillness. It made him angry, and all the more angry, that he hadn't a reason, to think of the charming creature at his side being mixed up with such elements, pushed and elbowed by them, conjoined with them in emulation, in unsightly strainings and clappings and

shoutings, in wordy, windy iteration of inanities. Worst of all was the idea that she should have expressed such a congregation to itself so acceptably, have been acclaimed and applauded by hoarse throats, have been lifted up, to all the vulgar multitude, as the queen of the occasion. He made the reflection, afterwards, that he was singularly ill-grounded in his wrath, inasmuch as it was none of his business what use Miss Tarrant chose to make of her energies, and, in addition to this, nothing else was to have been expected of her. But that reflection was absent now, and in its absence he saw only the fact that his companion had been odiously perverted. "Well, Miss Tarrant," he said, with a deeper seriousness than showed in his voice, "I am forced to the painful conclusion that you are simply ruined."

"Ruined? Ruined yourself!"

"Oh, I know the kind of women that Miss Chancellor had at her house, and what a group you must have made when you looked out at the Back Bay! It depresses me very much to think of it."

"We made a lovely, interesting group, and, if we had had a spare minute we would have been photographed," Verena said.

This led him to ask her if she had ever subjected herself to the process; and she answered that a photographer had been after her as soon as she got back from Europe, and that she had sat for him, and that there were certain shops in Boston where her portrait could be obtained. She gave him this information very simply, without pretense of vagueness of knowledge, spoke of the matter rather respectfully, indeed, as if it might be of some importance; and when he said that he should go and buy one of the little pictures as soon as he returned to town, contented herself with replying, "Well, be sure you pick out a good one!" He had not been altogether without a hope that she would offer to give him one, with her name written beneath, which was a mode of acquisition he would greatly have preferred; but this, evidently, had not occurred to her, and now, as they went further, her thought was following a different train. That was proved by her remarking, at the end of a silence, inconsequently, "Well, it showed I have a great use!" As he stared, wondering what she meant, she explained that she referred to the brilliancy of her success at the convention. "It proved I have a great use," she repeated, "and that is all I care for!"

"The use of a truly amiable woman is to make some honest man happy," Ransom said, with a sententiousness of which he was perfectly aware.

It was so marked that it caused her to stop short in the middle of the broad walk, while she looked at him with shining eyes. "See here, Mr. Ransom, do you know what strikes me?" she exclaimed. "The interest you take in me isn't really controversial—a bit. It's quite personal!" She was the most extraordinary girl; she could speak such words as those without the smallest look of added consciousness coming into her face, without the least supposable intention of coquetry, or any visible purpose of challenging the young man to say more.

"My interest in you—my interest in you," he began. Then hesitating, he broke off suddenly. "It is certain your discovery doesn't make it any less!"

"Well, that's better," she went on; "for we needn't dispute."

He laughed at the way she arranged it, and they presently reached the irregular group of heterogeneous buildings —chapels, dormitories, libraries, halls—which, scattered among slender trees, over a space reserved by means of a low rustic fence, rather than inclosed (for Harvard knows nothing either of the jealousy or the dignity of high walls and guarded gateways), constitutes the great university of Massachusetts. The yard, or college-precinct, is traversed by a number of straight little paths, over which, at certain hours of the day, a thousand undergraduates, with books under their arm and youth in their step, flit from one school to another. Verena Tarrant knew her way round, as she said to her companion; it was not the first time she had taken an admiring visitor to see the local monuments. Basil Ransom, walking with her from point to point, admired them all, and thought several of them exceedingly quaint and venerable. The rectangular structures of old red brick especially gratified his eye; the afternoon sun was yellow on their homely faces; their windows showed a peep of flowerpots and bright-colored curtains; they wore an expression of scholastic quietude, and exhaled for the young Mississippian a tradition, an antiquity. "This is the place where I ought to have been," he said to his charming guide. "I should have had a good time if I had been able to study here."

"Yes; I presume you feel yourself drawn to any place where ancient prejudices are garnered up," she answered, not without archness. "I know by the stand you take about our cause that you share the superstitions of the old book-men. You ought to have been at one of those really mediaeval universities that we saw on the other side, at Oxford, or Göttingen, or Padua. You would have been in perfect sympathy with their spirit."

"Well, I don't know much about those old haunts," Ransom rejoined. "I reckon this is good enough for me. And then it would have had the advantage that your residence isn't far, you know."

"Oh, I guess we shouldn't have seen you much at my residence! As you live in New York, you come, but here you wouldn't; that is always the way." With this light philosophy Verena beguiled the transit to the library, into which she introduced her companion with the air of a person familiar with the sanctified spot. This edifice, a diminished copy of the chapel of King's College, at the greater Cambridge, is a rich and

impressive institution; and as he stood there, in the bright, heated stillness, which seemed suffused with the odor of old print and old bindings, and looked up into the high, light vaults that hung over quiet book-laden galleries, alcoves and tables, and glazed cases where rarer treasures gleamed more vaguely, over busts of benefactors and portraits of worthies, bowed heads of working students and the gentle creak of passing messengers—as he took possession, in a comprehensive glance, of the wealth and wisdom of the place, he felt more than ever the soreness of an opportunity missed; but he abstained from expressing it (it was too deep for that), and in a moment Verena had introduced him to a young lady, a friend of hers, who, as she explained, was working on the catalogue, and whom she had asked for on entering the library, at a desk where another young lady was occupied. Miss Catching, the first-mentioned young lady, presented herself with promptness, offered Verena a low-toned but appreciative greeting, and, after a little, undertook to explain to Ransom the mysteries of the catalogue, which consisted of a myriad little cards, disposed alphabetically in immense chests of drawers. Ransom was deeply interested, and as, with Verena, he followed Miss Catching about (she was so good as to show them the establishment in all its ramifications), he considered with attention the young lady's fair ringlets and refined, anxious expression, saying to himself that this was in the highest degree a New England type. Verena found an opportunity to mention to him that she was wrapped up in the cause, and there was a moment during which he was afraid that his companion would expose him to her as one of its traducers; but there was that in Miss Catching's manner (and in the influence of the lofty halls), which deprecated loud pleasantry, and seemed to say, moreover, that if she were treated to such a revelation she should not know under what letter to range it.

"Now there is one place where perhaps it would be indelicate to take a Mississippian," Verena said, after this episode. "I mean the great place that towers above the others—that big building with the beautiful pinnacles, which you see from every point." But Basil Ransom had heard of the great Memorial Hall; he knew what memories it enshrined, and the worst that he should have to suffer there; and the ornate, overtopping structure, which was the finest piece of architecture he had ever seen, had moreover solicited his enlarged curiosity for the last half-hour. He thought there was rather too much brick about it, but it was buttressed, cloistered, turreted, dedicated, superscribed, as he had never seen anything; though it didn't look old, it looked significant; it covered a large area, and it sprang majestic into the winter air. It was detached from the rest of the collegiate group, and stood in a grassy triangle of its own. As he approached it with Verena, she suddenly stopped, to decline responsibility. "Now mind, if you don't like what's inside, it isn't my fault."

He looked at her an instant, smiling. "Is there anything against Mississippi?"

"Well, no, I don't think she is mentioned. But there is great praise of our young men in the war."

"It says they were brave, I suppose."

"Yes, it says so in Latin."

"Well, so they were—I know something about that," Basil Ransom said. "I must be brave enough to face them—it isn't the first time." And they went up the low steps and passed into the tall doors. Trie Memorial Hall of Harvard consists of three main divisions: one of them a theatre, for academic ceremonies; another a vast refectory, covered with a timbered roof, hung about with portraits and lighted by stained windows, like the halls of the colleges of Oxford; and the third, the most interesting, a chamber high, dim, and severe, consecrated to the sons of the university who fell in the long Civil War. Ransom and his companion wandered from one part of the building to another, and stayed their steps at several impressive points; but they lingered longest in the presence of the white, ranged tablets, each of which, in its proud, sad clearness, is inscribed with the name of a student-soldier. The effect of the place is singularly noble and solemn, and it is impossible to feel it without a lifting of the heart. If stands there for duty and honor, it speaks of sacrifice and example, seems a kind of temple to youth, manhood, generosity. Most of them were young, all were in their prime, and all of them had fallen; this simple idea hovers before the visitor and makes him read with tenderness each name and place—names often without other history, and forgotten Southern battles. For Ransom these things were not a challenge nor a taunt; they touched him with respect, with the sentiment of beauty. He was capable of being a generous foeman, and he forgot, now, the whole question of sides and parties; the simple emotion of the old fighting-time came back to him, and the monument around him seemed an embodiment of that memory; it arched over friends as well as enemies, the victims of defeat as well as the sons of triumph.

"It is very beautiful—but I think it is very dreadful!" This remark, from Verena, called him back to the present. "It's a real sin to put up such a building, just to glorify a lot of bloodshed. If it wasn't so majestic, I would have it pulled down."

"That is delightful feminine logic!" Ransom answered. "If, when women have the conduct of affairs, they fight as well as they reason, surely for them too we shall have to set up memorials."

Verena retorted that they would reason so well they would have no need to fight—they would usher in the reign of peace. "But this is very peaceful too," she added, looking about her; and she sat down on a low stone ledge, as if to enjoy the influence of the scene. Ransom left her alone for ten minutes; he wished to take another look at the inscribed tablets, and read again the names of the various engagements, at several

of which he had been present. When he came back to her she greeted him abruptly, with a question which had no reference to the solemnity of the spot. "If Miss Birdseye knew you were coming out to see me, can't *she* easily tell Olive? Then won't Olive make her reflections about your neglect of herself?"

"I don't care for her reflections. At any rate, I asked Miss Birdseye, as a favor, not to mention to her that she had met me," Ransom added.

Verena was silent a moment. "Your logic is almost as good as a woman's. Do change your mind and go to see her now," she went on. "She will probably be at home by the time you get to Charles Street. If she was a little strange, a little stiff with you before (I know just how she must have been), all that will be different today."

"Why will it be different?"

"Oh, she will be easier, more genial, much softer."

"I don't believe it," said Ransom; and his skepticism seemed none the less complete because it was light and smiling.

"She is much happier now—she can afford not to mind you."

"Not to mind me? That's a nice inducement for a gentleman to go and see a lady!"

"Well, she will be more gracious, because she feels now that she is more successful."

"You mean because she has brought you out? Oh, I have no doubt that has cleared the air for her immensely, and you have improved her very much. But I have got a charming impression out here, and I have no wish to put another —which won't be charming, anyhow you arrange it—on top of it."

"Well, she will be sure to know you have been round here, at any rate," Verena rejoined.

"How will she know, unless you tell her?"

"I tell her everything," said the girl; and now as soon as she had spoken, she blushed. He stood before her, tracing a figure on the mosaic pavement with his cane, conscious that in a moment they had become more intimate. They were discussing their affairs, which had nothing to do with the heroic symbols that surrounded them; but their affairs had suddenly grown so serious that there was no want of decency in their lingering there for the purpose. The implication that his visit might remain as a secret between them made them both feel it differently. To ask her to keep it so would have been, as it seemed to Ransom, a liberty, and, moreover, he didn't care so much as that; but if she were to prefer to do so such a preference would only make him consider the more that his expedition had been a success.

"Oh, then, you can tell her this!" he said in a moment.

"If I shouldn't, it would be the first—" And Verena checked herself.

"You must arrange that with your conscience," Ransom went on, laughing.

They came out of the hall, passed down the steps, and emerged from the Delta, as that portion of the college precinct is called. The afternoon had begun to wane, but the air was filled with a pink brightness, and there was a cool, pure smell, a vague breath of spring.

"Well, if I don't tell Olive, then you must leave me here," said Verena, stopping in the path and putting out a hand of farewell.

"I don't understand. What has that to do with it? Besides I thought you said you *must* tell," Ransom added. In playing with the subject this way, in enjoying her visible hesitation, he was slightly conscious of a man's brutality—of being pushed by an impulse to test her good nature, which seemed to have no limit. It showed no sign of perturbation as she answered:

"Well, I want to be free—to do as I think best. And, if there is a chance of my keeping it back, there mustn't be anything more—there must not, Mr. Ransom, really."

"Anything more? Why, what are you afraid there will be —if I should simply walk home with you?"

"I must go alone, I must hurry back to mother," she said, for all reply. And she again put out her hand, which he had not taken before.

Of course he took it now, and even held it a moment; he didn't like being dismissed, and was thinking of pretexts to linger. "Miss Birdseye said you would convert me, but you haven't yet," it came into his head to say.

"You can't tell yet; wait a little. My influence is peculiar; it sometimes comes out a long time afterwards!" This speech, on Verena's part, was evidently perfunctory, and the grandeur of her self-reference jocular; she was much more serious when she went on quickly, "Do you mean to say Miss Birdseye promised you that?"

"Oh yes. Talk about influence! you should have seen the influence I obtained over her."

"Well, what good will it do, if I'm going to tell Olive about your visit?"

"Well, you see, I think she hopes you won't. She believes you are going to convert me privately—so that I shall blaze forth, suddenly, out of the darkness of Mississippi, as a first-class proselyte: very effective and dramatic."

Verena struck Basil Ransom as constantly simple, but there were moments when her candor seemed to him preternatural. "If I thought that would be the effect, I might make an exception," she remarked, speaking as if such a result were, after all, possible.

"Oh, Miss Tarrant, you will convert me enough, anyway," said the young man.

"Enough? What do you mean by enough?"

"Enough to make me terribly unhappy."

She looked at him a moment, evidently not understanding; but she tossed him a retort at a venture, turned away, and took her course homeward. The retort was that if he should be unhappy it would serve him right—a form of words that committed her to nothing. As he returned to Boston he saw how curious he should be to learn whether she had betrayed him, as it were, to Miss Chancellor. He might learn through Mrs. Luna; that would almost reconcile him to going to see her again. Olive would mention it in writing to her sister, and Adeline would repeat the complaint. Perhaps she herself would even make him a scene about it; that would be, for him, part of the unhappiness he had foretold to Verena Tarrant.

26

"Mrs. Henry Burrage, at home Wednesday evening, March 26th, at half-past nine o'clock." It was in consequence of having received a card with these words inscribed upon it that Basil Ransom presented himself, on the evening she had designated, at the house of a lady he had never heard of before. The account of the relation of effect to cause is not complete, however, unless I mention that the card bore, furthermore, in the left-hand lower corner, the words: "An Address from Miss Verena Tarrant." He had an idea (it came mainly from the look and even the odor of the engraved pasteboard), that Mrs. Burrage was a member of the fashionable world, and it was with considerable surprise that he found himself in such an element. He wondered what had induced a denizen of that fine air to send him an invitation; then he said to himself that, obviously, Verena Tarrant had simply requested that this should be done. Mrs. Henry Burrage, whoever she might be, had asked her if she shouldn't like some of her own friends to be present, and she had said, Oh yes, and mentioned him in the happy group. She had been able to give Mrs. Burrage his address, for had it not been contained in the short letter he despatched to Monadnoc Place soon after his return from Boston, in which he thanked Miss Tarrant afresh for the charming hour she had enabled him to spend at Cambridge? She had not answered his letter at the time, but Mrs. Burrage's card was a very good answer. Such a missive deserved a rejoinder, and it was by way of rejoinder that he entered the streetcar which, on the evening of March 26th, was to deposit him at a corner adjacent to Mrs. Burrage's dwelling. He almost never went to evening parties (he knew scarcely any one who gave them, though Mrs. Luna had broken him in a little), and he was sure this occasion was of festive intention, would have nothing in common with the nocturnal "exercises" at Miss Birdseye's; but he would have exposed himself to almost any social discomfort in order to see Verena Tarrant on the platform. The platform it evidently was to be—private if not public—since one was admitted by a ticket given away if not sold. He took his in his pocket, quite ready to present it at the door. It would take some time for me to explain the contradiction to the reader; but Basil Ransom's desire to be present at one of Verena's regular performances was not diminished by the fact that he detested her views and thought the whole business a poor perversity. He understood her now very well (since his visit to Cambridge); he saw she was honest and natural; she had queer, bad lecture-blood in her veins, and a comically false idea of the aptitude of little girls for conducting movements; but her enthusiasm was of the purest, her illusions had a fragrance, and so far as the mania for producing herself personally was concerned, it had been distilled into her by people who worked her for ends which to Basil Ransom could only appear insane. She was a touching, ingenuous victim, unconscious of the pernicious forces which were hurrying her to her ruin. With this idea of ruin there had already associated itself in the young man's mind, the idea —a good deal more dim and incomplete—of rescue; and it was the disposition to confirm himself in the view that her charm was her own, and her fallacies, her absurdity, a mere reflection of unlucky circumstance, that led him to make an effort to behold her in the position in which he could least bear to think of her. Such a glimpse was all that was wanted to prove to him that she was a person for whom he might open an unlimited credit of tender compassion. He expected to suffer—to suffer deliciously.

By the time he had crossed Mrs. Burrage's threshold there was no doubt whatever in his mind that he was in the fashionable world. It was embodied strikingly in the stout, elderly, ugly lady, dressed in a brilliant color, with a twinkle of jewels and a bosom much uncovered, who stood near the door of the first room, and with whom the people passing in before him were shaking hands. Ransom made her a Mississippian bow, and she said she was delighted to see him, while people behind him pressed him forward. He yielded to the impulsion, and found himself in a great salon, amid lights and flowers, where the company was dense, and there were more twinkling, smiling ladies, with uncovered bosoms. It was certainly the fashionable world, for there was no one there whom he had ever seen before. The walls of the room were covered with pictures—the very ceiling was painted and framed. The people pushed each other a little, edged about, advanced and retreated, looking at each other with differing faces—sometimes blandly, unperceivingly, sometimes with a harshness of contemplation, a kind of cruelty, Ransom thought; sometimes with sudden nods and grimaces, inarticulate murmurs, followed by a quick reaction, a sort of gloom. He was now absolutely certain that he was in the best society. He was carried further and further forward, and saw that another room stretched beyond the one he had entered, in which there was a sort of little stage, covered with a red cloth, and an immense collection of chairs, arranged in rows. He became aware that people looked at him, as well as at each other, rather more, indeed, than at each other, and he wondered whether it were very visible in his appearance that his being there was a kind of exception. He didn't know how much his head looked over the heads of others, or that his brown complexion, fuliginous

eye, and straight black hair, the leonine fall of which I mentioned in the first pages of this narrative, gave him that relief which, in the best society, has the great advantage of suggesting a topic. But there were other topics besides, as was proved by a fragment of conversation, between two ladies, which reached his ear while he stood rather wistfully wondering where Verena Tarrant might be.

"Are you a member?" one of the ladies said to the other. "I didn't know you had joined."

"Oh, I haven't; nothing would induce me."

"That's not fair; you have all the fun and none of the responsibility."

"Oh, the fun—the fun!" exclaimed the second lady.

"You needn't abuse us, or I will never invite you," said the first.

"Well, I thought it was meant to be improving; that's all I mean; very good for the mind. Now, this woman tonight; isn't she from Boston?"

"Yes, I believe they have brought her on, just for this."

"Well, you must be pretty desperate when you have got to go to Boston for your entertainment."

"Well, there's a similar society there, and I never heard of their sending to New York."

"Of course not, they think they have got everything. But doesn't it make your life a burden, thinking what you can possibly have?"

"Oh dear, no. I am going to have Professor Gougenheim —all about the Talmud. You must come."

"Well, I'll come," said the second lady; "but nothing would induce me to be a regular member."

Whatever the mystic circle might be, Ransom agreed with the second lady that regular membership must have terrors, and he admired her independence in such an artificial world. A considerable part of the company had now directed itself to the further apartment—people had begun to occupy the chairs, to confront the empty platform. He reached the wide doors, and saw that the place was a spacious music-room, decorated in white and gold, with a polished floor and marble busts of composers, on brackets attached to the delicate panels. He forbore to enter, however, being shy about taking a seat, and seeing that the ladies were arranging themselves first. He turned back into the first room, to wait till the audience had massed itself, conscious that even if he were behind every one he should be able to make a long neck; and here, suddenly, in a corner, his eyes rested upon Olive Chancellor. She was seated a little apart, in an angle of the room, and she was looking straight at him; but as soon as she perceived that he saw her she dropped her eyes, giving no sign of recognition. Ransom hesitated a moment, but the next he went straight over to her. It had been in his mind that if Verena Tarrant was there, *she* would be there; an instinct told him that Miss Chancellor would not allow her dear friend to come to New York without her. It was very possible she meant to "cut" him—especially if she knew of his having cut her, the other week, in Boston; but it was his duty to take for granted she would speak to him, until the contrary should be definitely proved. Though he had seen her only twice he remembered well how acutely shy she was capable of being, and he thought it possible one of these spasms had seized her at the present time.

When he stood before her he found his conjecture perfectly just; she was white with the intensity of her self-consciousness; she was altogether in a very uncomfortable state. She made no response to his offer to shake hands with her, and he saw that she would never go through that ceremony again. She looked up at him when he spoke to her, and her lips moved; but her face was intensely grave and her eye had almost a feverish light. She had evidently got into her corner to be out of the way; he recognized in her the air of an interloper, as he had felt it in himself. The small sofa on which she had placed herself had the form to which the French give the name of *causeuse;* there was room on it for just another person, and Ransom asked her, with a cheerful accent, if he might sit down beside her. She turned toward him when he had done so, turned everything but her eyes, and opened and shut her fan while she waited for her fit of diffidence to pass away. Ransom himself did not wait; he took a jocular tone about their encounter, asking her if she had come to New York to rouse the people. She glanced round the room; the backs of Mrs. Burrage's guests, mainly, were presented to them, and their position was partly masked by a pyramid of flowers which rose from a pedestal close to Olive's end of the sofa and diffused a fragrance in the air.

"Do you call these the 'people'?" she asked.

"I haven't the least idea. I don't know who any of them are, not even who Mrs. Henry Burrage is. I simply received an invitation."

Miss Chancellor gave him no information on the point he had mentioned; she only said, in a moment: "Do you go wherever you are invited?"

"Why, I go if I think I may find you there," the young man replied, gallantly. "My card mentioned that Miss Tarrant would give an address, and I knew that wherever she is you are not far off. I have heard you are inseparable, from Mrs. Luna."

"Yes, we are inseparable. That is exactly why I am here."

"It's the fashionable world, then, you are going to stir up."

Olive remained for some time with her eyes fastened to the floor; then she flashed them up at her interlocutor. "It's a part of our life to go anywhere—to carry our work where it seems most needed. We have taught ourselves to stifle repulsion, distaste."

"Oh, I think this is very amusing," said Ransom. "It's a beautiful house, and there are some very pretty

faces. We haven't anything so brilliant in Mississippi."

To everything he said Olive offered at first a momentary silence, but the worst of her shyness was apparently leaving her.

"Are you successful in New York? do you like it?" she presently asked, uttering the inquiry in a tone of infinite melancholy, as if the eternal sense of duty forced it from her lips.

"Oh, successful! I am not successful as you and Miss Tarrant are; for (to my barbaric eyes) it is a great sign of prosperity to be the heroines of an occasion like this."

"Do I look like the heroine of an occasion?" asked Olive Chancellor, without an intention of humor, but with an effect that was almost comical.

"You would if you didn't hide yourself away. Are you not going into the other room to hear the speech? Everything is prepared."

"I am going when I am notified—when I am invited."

There was considerable majesty in her tone, and Ransom saw that something was wrong, that she felt neglected. To see that she was as ticklish with others as she had been with him made him feel forgiving, and there was in his manner a perfect disposition to forget their differences as he said, "Oh, there is plenty of time; the place isn't half full yet."

She made no direct rejoinder to this, but she asked him about his mother and sisters, what news he received from the South. "Have they any happiness?" she inquired, rather as if she warned him to take care not to pretend they had. He neglected her warning to the point of saying that there was one happiness they always had—that of having learned not to think about it too much, and to make the best of their circumstances. She listened to this with an air of great reserve, and apparently thought he had wished to give her a lesson; for she suddenly broke out, "You mean that you have traced a certain line for them, and that that's all you know about it!"

Ransom stared at her, surprised; he felt, now, that she would always surprise him. "Ah, don't be rough with me," he said, in his soft Southern voice; "don't you remember how you knocked me about when I called on you in Boston?"

"You hold us in chains, and then, when we writhe in our agony, you say we don't behave prettily!" These words, which did not lessen Ransom's wonderment, were the young lady's answer to his deprecatory speech. She saw that he was honestly bewildered and that in a moment more he would laugh at her, as he had done a year and a half before (she remembered it as if it had been yesterday); and to stop that off, at any cost, she went on hurriedly—"If you listen to Miss Tarrant, you will know what I mean."

"Oh, Miss Tarrant—Miss Tarrant!" And Basil Ransom's laughter came.

She had not escaped that mockery, after all, and she looked at him sharply now, her embarrassment having quite cleared up. "What do you know about her? What observation have you had?"

Ransom met her eye, and for a moment they scrutinized each other. Did she know of his interview with Verena a month before, and was her reserve simply the wish to place on him the burden of declaring that he had been to Boston since they last met, and yet had not called in Charles Street? He thought there was suspicion in her face; but in regard to Verena she would always be suspicious. If he had done at that moment just what would gratify him he would have said to her that he knew a great deal about Miss Tarrant, having lately had a long walk and talk with her; but he checked himself, with the reflection that if Verena had not betrayed him it would be very wrong in him to betray her. The sweetness of the idea that she should have thought the episode of his visit to Monadnoc Place worth placing under the rose, was quenched for the moment in his regret at not being able to let his disagreeable cousin know that he had passed *her* over. "Don't you remember my hearing her speak that night at Miss Birdseye's?" he said, presently. "And I met her the next day at your house, you know."

"She has developed greatly since then," Olive remarked drily; and Ransom felt sure that Verena had held her tongue.

At this moment a gentleman made his way through the clusters of Mrs. Burrage's guests and presented himself to Olive. "If you will do me the honor to take my arm I will find a good seat for you in the other room. It's getting to be time for Miss Tarrant to reveal herself. I have been taking her into the picture-room; there were some things she wanted to see. She is with my mother now," he added, as if Miss Chancellor's grave face constituted a sort of demand for an explanation of her friend's absence. "She said she was a little nervous; so I thought we would just move about."

"It's the first time I have ever heard of that!" said Olive Chancellor, preparing to surrender herself to the young man's guidance. He told her that he had reserved the best seat for her; it was evidently his desire to conciliate her, to treat her as a person of importance. Before leading her away, he shook hands with Ransom and remarked that he was very glad to see him; and Ransom saw that he must be the master of the house, though he could scarcely be the son of the stout lady in the doorway. He was a fresh, pleasant, handsome young man, with a bright friendly manner; he recommended Ransom to take a seat in the other room, without delay; if he had never heard Miss Tarrant he would have one of the greatest pleasures of his life.

"Oh, Mr. Ransom only comes to ventilate his prejudices," Miss Chancellor said, as she turned her back

to her kinsman. He shrank from pushing into the front of the company, which was now rapidly filling the music-room, and contented himself with lingering in the doorway, where several gentlemen were stationed. The seats were all occupied; all, that is, save one, toward which he saw Miss Chancellor and her companion direct themselves, squeezing and edging past the people who were standing up against the walls. This was quite in front, close to the little platform; every one noticed Olive as she went, and Ransom heard a gentleman near him say to another—"I guess she's one of the same kind." He looked for Verena, but she was apparently keeping out of sight. Suddenly he felt himself smartly tapped on the back, and, turning round, perceived Mrs. Luna, who had been prodding him with her fan.

"You won't speak to me in my own house—that I have almost grown used to; but if you are going to pass me over in public I think you might give me warning first." This was only her archness, and he knew what to make of that now; she was dressed in yellow and looked very plump and gay. He wondered at the unerring instinct by which she had discovered his exposed quarter. The outer room was completely empty; she had come in at the further door and found the field free for her operations. He offered to find her a place where she could see and hear Miss Tarrant, to get her a chair to stand on, even, if she wished to look over the heads of the gentlemen in the doorway; a proposal which she greeted with the inquiry—"Do you suppose I came here for the sake of that chatterbox? haven't I told you what I think of her?"

"Well, you certainly did not come here for my sake," said Ransom, anticipating this insinuation; "for you couldn't possibly have known I was coming."

"I guessed it—a presentiment told me!" Mrs. Luna declared; and she looked up at him with searching, accusing eyes. "I know what you have come for," she cried in a moment. "You never mentioned to me that you knew Mrs. Burrage!"

"I don't—I never had heard of her till she asked me."

"Then why in the world *did* she ask you?"

Ransom had spoken a trifle rashly; it came over him, quickly, that there were reasons why he had better not have said that. But almost as quickly he covered up his mistake. "I suppose your sister was so good as to ask for a card for me."

"My sister? My grandmother! I know how Olive loves you. Mr. Ransom, you are very deep." She had drawn him well into the room, out of earshot of the group in the doorway, and he felt that if she should be able to compass her wish she would organize a little entertainment for herself, in the outer drawing room, in opposition to Miss Tarrant's address. "Please come and sit down here a moment; we shall be quite undisturbed. I have something very particular to say to you." She led the way to the little sofa in the corner, where he had been talking with Olive a few minutes before, and he accompanied her, with extreme reluctance, grudging the moments that he should be obliged to give to her. He had quite forgotten that he once had a vision of spending his life in her society, and he looked at his watch as he made the observation:

"I haven't the least idea of losing any of the sport in there, you know."

He felt, the next instant, that he oughtn't to have said that either; but he was irritated, disconcerted, and he couldn't help it. It was in the nature of a gallant Mississippian to do everything a lady asked him, and he had never, remarkable as it may appear, been in the position of finding such a request so incompatible with his own desires as now. It was a new predicament, for Mrs. Luna evidently meant to keep him if she could. She looked round the room, more and more pleased at their having it to themselves, and for the moment said nothing more about the singularity of his being there. On the contrary, she became freshly jocular, remarked that now they had got hold of him they wouldn't easily let him go, they would make him entertain them, induce him to gave a lecture—on the "Lights and Shadows of Southern Life," or the "Social Peculiarities of Mississippi" —before the Wednesday Club.

"And what in the world is the Wednesday Club? I suppose it's what those ladies were talking about," Ransom said.

"I don't know your ladies, but the Wednesday Club is this thing. I don't mean you and me here together, but all those deluded beings in the other room. It is New York trying to be like Boston. It is the culture, the good form, of the metropolis. You might not think it, but it is. It's the "quiet set"; they *are* quiet enough; you might hear a pin drop, in there. Is someone going to offer up a prayer? How happy Olive must be, to be taken so seriously! They form an association for meeting at each other's houses, every week, and having some performance, or some paper read, or some subject explained. The more dreary it is and the more fearful the subject, the more they think it is what it ought to be. They have an idea this is the way to make New York society intellectual. There's a sumptuary law—isn't that what you call it?—about suppers, and they restrict themselves to a kind of Spartan broth. When it's made by their French cooks it isn't bad. Mrs. Burrage is one of the principal members—one of the founders, I believe; and when her turn has come round, formerly—it comes only once in the winter for each—I am told she has usually had very good music. But that is thought rather a base evasion, a begging of the question; the vulgar set can easily keep up with them on music. So Mrs. Burrage conceived the extraordinary idea"—and it was wonderful to hear how Mrs. Luna pronounced that adjective—"of sending on to Boston for that girl. It was her son, of course, who put it into her head; he has been at Cambridge for some years—that's where Verena lived, you

know—and he was as thick with her as you please out there. Now that he is no longer there it suits him very well to have her here. She is coming on a visit to his mother when Olive goes. I asked them to stay with me, but Olive declined, majestically; she said they wished to be in some place where they would be free to receive "sympathizing friends." So they are staying at some extraordinary kind of New Jerusalem boarding house, in Tenth Street; Olive thinks it's her duty to go to such places. I was greatly surprised that she should let Verena be drawn into such a worldly crowd as this; but she told me they had made up their minds not to let *any* occasion slip, that they could sow the seed of truth in drawing rooms as well as in workshops, and that if a single person was brought round to their ideas they should have been justified in coming on. That's what they are doing in there—sowing the seed; but you shall not be the one that's brought round, I shall take care of that. Have you seen my delightful sister yet? The way she *does* arrange herself when she wants to protest against frills! She looks as if she thought it pretty barren ground round here, now she has come to see it. I don't think she thinks you can be saved in a French dress, anyhow. I must say I call it a *very* base evasion of Mrs. Burrage's, producing Verena Tarrant; it's worse than the meretricious music. Why didn't she honestly send for a *ballerina* from Niblo's—if she wanted a young woman capering about on a platform? They don't care a fig about poor Olive's ideas; it's only because Verena has strange hair, and shiny eyes, and gets herself up like a prestidigitator's assistant. I have never understood how Olive can reconcile herself to Verena's really low style of dress. I suppose it's only because her clothes are so fearfully made. You look as if you didn't believe me—but I assure you that the cut is revolutionary; and that's a salve to Olive's conscience."

Ransom was surprised to hear that he looked as if he didn't believe her, for he had found himself, after his first uneasiness, listening with considerable interest to her account of the circumstances under which Miss Tarrant was visiting New York. After a moment, as the result of some private reflection, he propounded this question: "Is the son of the lady of the house a handsome young man, very polite, in a white vest?"

"I don't know the color of his vest—but he has a kind of fawning manner. Verena judges from that that he is in love with her."

"Perhaps he is," said Ransom. "You say it was his idea to get her to come on."

"Oh, he likes to flirt; that is highly probable."

"Perhaps she has brought him round."

"Not to where she wants, I think. The property is very large; he will have it all one of these days."

"Do you mean she wishes to impose on him the yoke of matrimony?" Ransom asked, with Southern languor.

"I believe she thinks matrimony an exploded superstition; but there is here and there a case in which it is still the best thing; when the gentleman's name happens to be Burrage and the young lady's Tarrant. I don't admire 'Burrage' so much myself. But I think she would have captured this present scion if it hadn't been for Olive. Olive stands between them—she wants to keep her in the single sisterhood; to keep her, above all, for herself. Of course she won't listen to her marrying, and she has put a spoke in the wheel. She has brought her to New York; that may seem against what I say; but the girl pulls hard, she has to humor her, to give her her head sometimes, to throw something overboard, in short, to save the rest. You may say, as regards Mr. Burrage, that it's a queer taste in a gentleman; but there is no arguing about that. It's queer taste in a lady, too; for she is a lady, poor Olive. You can see that tonight. She is dressed like a book-agent, but she is more distinguished than anyone here. Verena, beside her, looks like a walking advertisement."

When Mrs. Luna paused, Basil Ransom became aware that, in the other room, Verena's address had begun; the sound of her clear, bright, ringing voice, an admirable voice for public uses, came to them from the distance. His eagerness to stand where he could hear her better, and see her into the bargain, made him start in his place, and this movement produced an outgush of mocking laughter on the part of his companion. But she didn't say—"Go, go, deluded man, I take pity on you!" she only remarked, with light impertinence, that he surely wouldn't be so wanting in gallantry as to leave a lady absolutely alone in a public place—it was so Mrs. Luna was pleased to qualify Mrs. Burrage's drawing room—in the face of her entreaty that he would remain with her. She had the better of poor Ransom, thanks to the superstitions of Mississippi. It was in his simple code a gross rudeness to withdraw from conversation with a lady at a party before another gentleman should have come to take one's place; it was to inflict on the lady a kind of outrage. The other gentlemen, at Mrs. Burrage's, were all too well occupied; there was not the smallest chance of one of them coming to his rescue. He couldn't leave Mrs. Luna, and yet he couldn't stay with her and lose the only thing he had come so much out of his way for. "Let me at least find you a place over there, in the doorway. You can stand upon a chair—you can lean on me."

"Thank you very much; I would much rather lean on this sofa. And I am much too tired to stand on chairs. Besides, I wouldn't for the world that either Verena or Olive should see me craning over the heads of the crowd—as if I attached the smallest importance to their perorations!"

"It isn't time for the peroration yet," Ransom said, with savage dryness; and he sat forward, with his elbow on his knees, his eyes on the ground, a flush in his sallow cheek.

"It's never time to say such things as those," Mrs. Luna remarked, arranging her laces.

"How do you know what she is saying?"

"I can tell by the way her voice goes up and down. It sounds so silly."

Ransom sat there five minutes longer—minutes which, he felt, the recording angel ought to write down to his credit —and asked himself how Mrs. Luna could be such a goose as not to see that she was making him hate her. But she was goose enough for anything. He tried to appear indifferent, and it occurred to him to doubt whether the Mississippi system could be right, after all. It certainly hadn't foreseen such a case as this. "It's as plain as day that Mr. Burrage intends to marry her—if he can," he said in a minute; that remark being better calculated than any other he could think of to dissimulate his real state of mind.

It drew no rejoinder from his companion, and after an instant he turned his head a little and glanced at her. The result of something that silently passed between them was to make her say, abruptly: "Mr. Ransom, my sister never sent you an invitation to this place. Didn't it come from Verena Tarrant?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"As you hadn't the least acquaintance with Mrs. Burrage, who else could it have come from?"

"If it came from Miss Tarrant, I ought at least to recognize her courtesy by listening to her."

"If you rise from this sofa I will tell Olive what I suspect. She will be perfectly capable of carrying Verena off to China—or anywhere out of your reach."

"And pray what is it you suspect?"

"That you two have been in correspondence."

"Tell her whatever you like, Mrs. Luna," said the young man, with the grimness of resignation.

"You are quite unable to deny it, I see."

"I never contradict a lady."

"We shall see if I can't make you tell a fib. Haven't you been seeing Miss Tarrant, too?"

"Where should I have seen her? I can't see all the way to Boston, as you said the other day."

"Haven't you been there—on secret visits?"

Ransom started just perceptibly; but to conceal it, the next instant, he stood up.

"They wouldn't be secret if I were to tell you."

Looking down at her he saw that her words were a happy hit, not the result of definite knowledge. But she appeared to him vain, egotistical, grasping, odious.

"Well, I shall give the alarm," she went on; "this is, I will if you leave me. Is that the way a Southern gentleman treats a lady? Do as I wish, and I will let you off!"

"You won't let me off from staying with you."

"Is it such a *corvée?* I never heard of such rudeness!" Mrs. Luna cried. "All the same, I am determined to keep you if I can!"

Ransom felt that she must be in the wrong, and yet superficially she seemed (and it was quite intolerable), to have right on her side. All this while Verena's golden voice, with her words indistinct, solicited, tantalized his ear. The question had evidently got on Mrs. Luna's nerves; she had reached that point of feminine embroilment when a woman is perverse for the sake of perversity, and even with a clear vision of bad consequences.

"You have lost your head," he relieved himself by saying, as he looked down at her.

"I wish you would go and get me some tea."

"You say that only to embarrass me." He had hardly spoken when a great sound of applause, the clapping of many hands, and the cry from fifty throats of "Brava, brava!" floated in and died away. All Ransom's pulses throbbed, he flung his scruples to the winds, and after remarking to Mrs. Luna—still with all due ceremony—that he feared he must resign himself to forfeiting her good opinion, turned his back upon her and strode away to the open door of the music-room. "Well, I have never been so insulted!" he heard her exclaim, with exceeding sharpness, as he left her; and, glancing back at her, as he took up his position, he saw her still seated on her sofa—alone in the lamp-lit desert—with her eyes making, across the empty space, little vindictive points. Well, she could come where he was, if she wanted him so much; he would support her on an ottoman, and make it easy for her to see. But Mrs. Luna was uncompromising; he became aware, after a minute, that she had withdrawn, majestically, from the place, and he did not see her again that evening.

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He could command the music-room very well from where he stood, behind a thick outer fringe of intently listening men. Verena Tarrant was erect on her little platform, dressed in white, with flowers in her bosom. The red cloth beneath her feet looked rich in the light of lamps placed on high pedestals on either side of the stage; it gave her figure a setting of color which made it more pure and salient. She moved freely in her exposed isolation, yet with great sobriety of gesture; there was no table in front of her, and she had no notes in her hand, but stood there like an actress before the footlights, or a singer spinning vocal sounds to a silver thread. There was such a risk that a slim provincial girl, pretending to fascinate a couple of hundred *blasé* New Yorkers by simply giving them her ideas, would fail of her effect, that at the end of a few moments Basil Ransom became aware that he was watching her in very much the same excited way as if she had been performing, high above his head, on the trapeze. Yet, as one listened, it was impossible not to perceive that she was in perfect possession of her faculties, her subject, her audience; and he remembered the other time at Miss Birdseye's well enough to be able to measure the ground she had traveled since then. This exhibition was much more complete, her manner much more assured; she seemed to speak and survey the whole place from a much greater height. Her voice, too, had developed; he had forgotten how beautiful it could be when she raised it to its full capacity. Such a tone as that, so pure and rich, and yet so young, so natural, constituted in itself a talent; he didn't wonder that they had made a fuss about her at the Female Convention, if she filled their hideous hall with such a music. He had read, of old, of the *improvisatrice* of Italy, and this was a chastened, modern, American version of the type, a New England Corinna, with a mission instead of a lyre. The most graceful part of her was her earnestness, the way her delightful eyes, wandering over the "fashionable audience" (before which she was so perfectly unabashed), as if she wished to resolve it into a single sentient personality, seemed to say that the only thing in life she cared for was to put the truth into a form that would render conviction irresistible. She was as simple as she was charming, and there was not a glance or motion that did not seem part of the pure, still-burning passion that animated her. She had indeed—it was manifest—reduced the company to unanimity; their attention was anything but languid; they smiled back at her when she smiled; they were noiseless, motionless when she was solemn; and it was evident that the entertainment which Mrs. Burrage had had the happy thought of offering to her friends would be memorable in the annals of the Wednesday Club. It was agreeable to Basil Ransom to think that Verena noticed him in his corner; her eyes played over her listeners so freely that you couldn't say they rested in one place more than another; nevertheless, a single rapid ray, which, however, didn't in the least strike him as a deviation from her ridiculous, fantastic, delightful argument, let him know that he had been missed and now was particularly spoken to. This glance was a sufficient assurance that his invitation had come to him by the girl's request. He took for granted the matter of her speech was ridiculous; how could it help being, and what did it signify if it was? She was none the less charming for that, and the moonshine she had been plied with was none the less moonshine for her being charming. After he had stood there a quarter of an hour he became conscious that he should not be able to repeat a word she had said; he had not definitely heeded it, and yet he had not lost a vibration of her voice. He had discovered Olive Chancellor by this time; she was in the front row of chairs, at the end, on the left; her back was turned to him, but he could see half her sharp profile, bent down a little and absolutely motionless. Even across the wide interval her attitude expressed to him a kind of rapturous stillness, the concentration of triumph. There were several irrepressible effusions of applause, instantly self-checked, but Olive never looked up, at the loudest, and such a calmness as that could only be the result of passionate volition. Success was in the air, and she was tasting it; she tasted it, as she did everything, in a way of her own. Success for Verena was success for her, and Ransom was sure that the only thing wanting to her triumph was that he should have been placed in the line of her vision, so that she might enjoy his embarrassment and confusion, might say to him, in one of her dumb, cold flashes—*"Now* do you think our movement is not a force—*now* do you think that women are meant to be slaves?" Honestly, he was not conscious of any confusion; it subverted none of his heresies to perceive that Verena Tarrant had even more power to fix his attention than he had hitherto supposed. It was fixed in a way it had not been yet, however, by his at last understanding her speech, feeling it reach his inner sense through the impediment of mere dazzled vision. Certain phrases took on a meaning for him —an appeal she was making to those who still resisted the beneficent influence of the truth. They appeared to be mocking, cynical men, mainly; many of whom were such triflers and idlers, so heartless and brainless that it didn't matter much what they thought on any subject; if the old tyranny needed to be propped up by *them* it showed it was in a pretty bad way. But there were others whose prejudice was

stronger and more cultivated, pretended to rest upon study and argument. To those she wished particularly to address herself; she wanted to waylay them, to say, "Look here, you're all wrong; you'll be so much happier when I have convinced you. Just give me five minutes," she should like to say; "just sit down here and let me ask a simple question. Do you think any state of society can come to good that is based upon an organized wrong?" That was the simple question that Verena desired to propound, and Basil smiled across the room at her with an amused tenderness as he gathered that she conceived it to be a poser. He didn't think it would frighten him much if she were to ask him that, and he would sit down with her for as many minutes as she liked.

He, of course, was one of the systematic scoffers, one of those to whom she said—"Do you know how you strike me? You strike me as men who are starving to death while they have a cupboard at home, all full of bread and meat and wine; or as blind, demented beings who let themselves be cast into a debtor's prison, while in their pocket they have the key of vaults and treasure-chests heaped up with gold and silver. The meat and wine, the gold and silver," Verena went on, "are simply the suppressed and wasted force, the precious sovereign remedy, of which society insanely deprives itself—the genius, the intelligence, the inspiration of women. It is dying, inch by inch, in the midst of old superstitions which it invokes in vain, and yet it has the elixir of life in its hands. Let it drink but a draught, and it will bloom once more; it will be refreshed, radiant; it will find its youth again. The heart, the heart is cold, and nothing but the touch of woman can warm it, make it act. We *are* the Heart of humanity, and let us have the courage to insist on it! The public life of the world will move in the same barren, mechanical, vicious circle—the circle of egotism, cruelty, ferocity, jealousy, greed, of blind striving to do things only for *some,* at the cost of others, instead of trying to do everything for all. All, all? Who dares to say 'all' when we are not there? We are an equal, a splendid, an inestimable part. Try us and you'll see—you will wonder how, without us, society has ever dragged itself even this distance—so wretchedly small compared with what it might have been—on its painful earthly pilgrimage. That is what I should like above all to pour into the ears of those who still hold out, who stiffen their necks and repeat hard, empty formulas, which are as dry as a broken gourd that has been flung away in the desert. I would take them by their selfishness, their indolence, their interest. I am not here to recriminate, nor to deepen the gulf that already yawns between the sexes, and I don't accept the doctrine that they are natural enemies, since my plea is for a union far more intimate—provided it be equal—than any that the sages and philosophers of former times have ever dreamed of. Therefore I shall not touch upon the subject of men's being most easily influenced by considerations of what is most agreeable and profitable for *them;* I shall simply assume that they *are* so influenced, and I shall say to them that our cause would long ago have been gained if their vision were not so dim, so veiled, even in matters in which their own interests are concerned. If they had the same quick sight as women, if they had the intelligence of the heart, the world would be very different now; and I assure you that half the bitterness of our lot is to see so clearly and not to be able to do! Good gentlemen all, if I could make you believe how much brighter and fairer and sweeter the garden of life would be for you, if you would only let us help you to keep it in order! You would like so much better to walk there, and you would find grass and trees and flowers that would make you think you were in Eden. That is what I should like to press home to each of you, personally, individually—-to give him the vision of the world as it hangs perpetually before me, redeemed, transfigured, by a new moral tone. There would be generosity, tenderness, sympathy, where there is now only brute force and sordid rivalry. But you really do strike me as stupid even about your own welfare! Some of you say that we have already all the influence we can possibly require, and talk as if we ought to be grateful that we are allowed even to breathe. Pray, who shall judge what we require if not we ourselves? We require simply freedom; we require the lid to be taken off the box in which we have been kept for centuries. You say it's a very comfortable, cozy, convenient box, with nice glass sides, so that we can see out, and that all that's wanted is to give another quiet turn to the key. That is very easily answered. Good gentlemen, you have never been in the box, and you haven't the least idea how it feels!"

The historian who has gathered these documents together does not deem it necessary to give a larger specimen of Verena's eloquence, especially as Basil Ransom, through whose ears we are listening to it, arrived, at this point, at a definite conclusion. He had taken her measure as a public speaker, judged her importance in the field of discussion, the cause of reform. Her speech, in itself, had about the value of a pretty essay, committed to memory and delivered by a bright girl at an "academy"; it was vague, thin, rambling, a tissue of generalities that glittered agreeably enough in Mrs. Burrage's veiled lamplight. From any serious point of view it was neither worth answering nor worth considering, and Basil Ransom made his reflections on the crazy character of the age in which such a performance as that was treated as an intellectual effort, a contribution to a question. He asked himself what either he or anyone else would think of it if Miss Chancellor—or even Mrs. Luna—had been on the platform instead of the actual declaimer. Nevertheless, its importance was high, and consisted precisely, in part, of the fact that the voice was not the voice of Olive or of Adeline. Its importance was that Verena was unspeakably attractive, and this was all the greater for him in the light of the fact, which quietly dawned upon him as he stood there, that he was falling in love with her. It had tapped at his heart for recognition, and before he could hesitate

or challenge, the door had sprung open and the mansion was illuminated. He gave no outward sign; he stood gazing as at a picture; but the room wavered before his eyes, even Verena's figure danced a little. This did not make the sequel of her discourse more clear to him; her meaning faded again into the agreeable vague, and he simply felt her presence, tasted her voice. Yet the act of reflection was not suspended; he found himself rejoicing that she was so weak in argument, so inevitably verbose. The idea that she was brilliant, that she counted as a factor only because the public mind was in a muddle, was not an humiliation but a delight to him; it was a proof that her apostleship was all nonsense, the most passing of fashions, the veriest of delusions, and that she was meant for something divinely different—for privacy, for him, for love. He took no measure of the duration of her talk; he only knew, when it was over and succeeded by a clapping of hands, an immense buzz of voices and shuffling of chairs, that it had been capitally bad, and that her personal success, wrapping it about with a glamour like the silver mist that surrounds a fountain, was such as to prevent its badness from being a cause of mortification to her lover. The company—such of it as did not immediately close together around Verena—filed away into the other rooms, bore him in its current into the neighborhood of a table spread for supper, where he looked for signs of the sumptuary law mentioned to him by Mrs. Luna. It appeared to be embodied mainly in the glitter of crystal and silver, and the fresh tints of mysterious viands and jellies, which looked desirable in the soft circle projected by lace-fringed lamps. He heard the popping of corks, he felt a pressure of elbows, a thickening of the crowd, perceived that he was glowered at, squeezed against the table, by contending gentlemen who observed that he usurped space, was neither feeding himself nor helping others to feed. He had lost sight of Verena; she had been borne away in clouds of compliment; but he found himself thinking —almost paternally—that she must be hungry after so much chatter, and he hoped some one was getting her something to eat. After a moment, just as he was edging away, for his own opportunity to sup much better than usual was not what was uppermost in his mind, this little vision was suddenly embodied—embodied by the appearance of Miss Tarrant, who faced him, in the press, attached to the arm of a young man now recognizable to him as the son of the house—the smiling, fragrant youth who an hour before had interrupted his colloquy with Olive. He was leading her to the table, while people made way for them, covering Verena with gratulations of word and look. Ransom could see that, according to a phrase which came back to him just then, oddly, out of some novel or poem he had read of old, she was the cynosure of every eye. She looked beautiful, and they were a beautiful couple. As soon as she saw him, she put out her left hand to him—the other was in Mr. Burrage's arm—and said: "Well, don't you think it's all true?"

"No, not a word of it!" Ransom answered, with a kind of joyous sincerity. "But it doesn't make any difference."

"Oh, it makes a great deal of difference to me!" Verena cried.

"I mean to me. I don't care in the least whether I agree with you," Ransom said, looking askance at young Mr. Burrage, who had detached himself and was getting something for Verena to eat.

"Ah, well, if you are so indifferent!"

"It's not because I'm indifferent!" His eyes came back to her own, the expression of which had changed before they quitted them. She began to complain to her companion, who brought her something very dainty on a plate, that Mr. Ransom was "standing out," that he was about the hardest subject she had encountered yet. Henry Burrage smiled upon Ransom in a way that was meant to show he remembered having already spoken to him, while the Mississippian said to himself that there was nothing on the face of it to make it strange there should be between these fair, successful young persons some such question of love or marriage as Mrs. Luna had tattled about. Mr. Burrage was successful, he could see that in the turn of an eye; not perhaps as having a commanding intellect or a very strong character, but as being rich, polite, handsome, happy, amiable, and as wearing a splendid camellia in his buttonhole. And that *he,* at any rate, thought Verena had succeeded was proved by the casual, civil tone, and the contented distraction of eye, with which he exclaimed, "You don't mean to say you were not moved by that! It's my opinion that Miss Tarrant will carry everything before her." He was so pleased himself, and so safe in his conviction, that it didn't matter to him what anyone else thought; which was, after all, just Basil Ransom's own state of mind.

'Oh! I didn't say I wasn't moved," the Mississippian remarked.

"Moved the wrong way!" said Verena. "Never mind; you'll be left behind."

"If I am, you will come back to console me."

"Back? I shall never come back!" the girl replied, gaily.

"You'll be the very first!" Ransom went on, feeling himself now, and as if by a sudden clearing up of his spiritual atmosphere, no longer in the vein for making the concessions of chivalry, and yet conscious that his words were an expression of homage.

"Oh, I call that presumptuous!" Mr. Burrage exclaimed, turning away to get a glass of water for Verena, who had refused to accept champagne, mentioning that she had never drunk any in her life and that she associated a kind of iniquity with it. Olive had no wine in her house (not that Verena gave this explanation), but her father's old madeira and a little claret; of the former of which liquors Basil Ransom had highly approved the day he dined with her.

"Does he believe in all those lunacies?" he inquired, knowing perfectly what to think about the charge of presumption brought by Mr. Burrage.

"Why, he's crazy about our movement," Verena responded. "He's one of my most gratifying converts."

"And don't you despise him for it?"

"Despise him? Why, you seem to think I swing round pretty often!"

"Well, I have an idea that I shall see you swing round yet," Ransom remarked, in a tone in which it would have appeared to Henry Burrage, had he heard these words, that presumption was pushed to fatuity.

On Verena, however, they produced no impression that prevented her from saying simply, without the least rancor, "Well, if you expect to draw me back five hundred years, I hope you won't tell Miss Birdseye." And as Ransom did not seize immediately the reason of her allusion, she went on, "You know she is convinced it will be just the other way. I went to see her after you had been at Cambridge—almost immediately."

"Darling old lady—I hope she's well," the young man said.

"Well, she's tremendously interested."

"She's always interested in something, isn't she?"

"Well, this time it's in our relations, yours and mine," Verena replied, in a tone in which only Verena could say a thing like that. "You ought to see how she throws herself into them. She is sure it will all work round for your good.

"All what, Miss Tarrant?" Ransom asked.

"Well, what I told her. She is sure you are going to become one of our leaders, that you are very gifted for treating great questions and acting on masses of people, that you will become quite enthusiastic about our uprising, and that when you go up to the top as one of our champions it will all have been through me."

Ransom stood there, smiling at her; the dusky glow in his eyes expressed a softness representing no prevision of such laurels, but which testified none the less to Verena's influence. "And what you want is that I shouldn't undeceive her?"

"Well, I don't want you to be hypocritical—if you shouldn't take our side; but I do think that it would be sweet if the dear old thing could just cling to her illusion. She won't live so very long, probably; she told me the other day she was ready for her final rest; so it wouldn't interfere much with your freedom. She feels quite romantic about it —your being a Southerner and all, and not naturally in sympathy with Boston ideas, and your meeting her that way in the street and making yourself known to her. She won't believe but what I shall move you."

"Don't fear, Miss Tarrant, she shall be satisfied," Ransom said, with a laugh which he could see she but partially understood. He was prevented from making his meaning more clear by the return of Mr. Burrage, bringing not only Verena's glass of water but a smooth-faced, rosy, smiling old gentleman, who had a velvet waistcoat, and thin white hair, brushed effectively, and whom he introduced to Verena under a name which Ransom recognized as that of a rich and venerable citizen, conspicuous for his public spirit and his large almsgiving. Ransom had lived long enough in New York to know that a request from this ancient worthy to be made known to Miss Tarrant would mark her for the approval of the respectable, stamp her as a success of no vulgar sort; and as he turned away, a faint, inaudible sigh passed his lips, dictated by the sense that he himself belonged to a terribly small and obscure minority. He turned away because, as we know, he had been taught that a gentleman talking to a lady must always do that when a new gentleman is presented; though he observed, looking back, after a minute, that young Mr. Burrage evidently had no intention of abdicating in favor of the eminent philanthropist. He thought he had better go home; he didn't know what might happen at such a party as that, nor when the proceedings might be supposed to terminate; but after considering it a minute he dismissed the idea that there was a chance of Verena's speaking again. If he was a little vague about this, however, there was no doubt in his mind as to the obligation he was under to take leave first of Mrs. Burrage. He wished he knew where Verena was staying; he wanted to see her alone, not in a supper-room crowded with millionaires. As he looked about for the hostess it occurred to him that she would know, and that if he were able to quench a certain shyness sufficiently to ask her, she would tell him. Having satisfied himself presently that she was not in the supper-room, he made his way back to the parlors, where the company now was much diminished. He looked again into the music-room, tenanted only by half a dozen couples, who were cultivating privacy among the empty chairs, and here he perceived Mrs. Burrage sitting in conversation with Olive Chancellor (the latter, apparently, had not moved from her place), before the deserted scene of Verena's triumph. His search had been so little for Olive that at the sight of her he faltered a moment; then he pulled himself together, advancing with a consciousness of the Mississippi manner. He felt Olive's eyes receiving him; she looked at him as if it was just the hope that she shouldn't meet him again that had made her remain where she was. Mrs. Burrage got up, as he bade her good night, and Olive followed her example.

"So glad you were able to come. Wonderful creature, isn't she? She can do anything she wants."

These words from the elder lady Ransom received at first with a reserve which, as he trusted, suggested

extreme respect; and it was a fact that his silence had a kind if Southern solemnity in it. Then he said, in a tone equally expressive of great deliberation:

"Yes, madam, I think I never was present at an exhibition, an entertainment of any kind, which held me more completely under the charm."

"Delighted you liked it. I didn't know what in the world to have, and this has proved an inspiration—for me as well as for Miss Tarrant. Miss Chancellor has been telling me how they have worked together; it's really quite beautiful. Miss Chancellor is Miss Tarrant's great friend and colleague. Miss Tarrant assures me that she couldn't do anything without her." After which explanation, turning to Olive, Mrs. Burrage murmured: "Let me introduce Mr.——introduce Mr.——"

But she had forgotten poor Ransom's name, forgotten who had asked her for a card for him; and, perceiving it, he came to her rescue with the observation that he was a kind of cousin of Miss Olive's, if she didn't repudiate him, and that he knew what a tremendous partnership existed between the two young ladies. "When I applauded I was applauding the firm—that is, you too," he said, smiling, to his kinswoman.

"Your applause? I confess I don't understand it," Olive replied, with much promptitude.

"Well, to tell the truth, I didn't myself!"

"Oh yes, of course I know; that's why—that's why——" And this further speech of Mrs. Burrage's, in reference to the relationship between the young man and her companion, faded also into vagueness. She had been on the point of saying it was the reason why he was in her house; but she had bethought herself in time that this ought to pass as a matter of course. Basil Ransom could see she was a woman who could carry off an awkwardness like that, and he considered her with a sense of her importance. She had a brisk, familiar, slightly impatient way, and if she had not spoken so fast, and had more of the softness of the Southern matron, she would have reminded him of a certain type of woman he had seen of old, before the changes in his own part of the world—the clever, capable, hospitable proprietress, widowed or unmarried, of a big plantation carried on by herself. "If you are her cousin, do take Miss Chancellor to have some supper—instead of going away," she went on, with her infelicitous readiness.

At this Olive instantly seated herself again.

"I am much obliged to you; I never touch supper. I shall not leave this room—I like it."

"Then let me send you something—or let Mr.——, your cousin, remain with you."

Olive looked at Mrs. Burrage with a strange beseeching-ness, "I am very tired, I must rest. These occasions leave me exhausted."

"Ah yes, I can imagine that. Well, then, you shall be quite quiet—I shall come back to you." And with a smile of farewell for Basil Ransom, Mrs. Burrage moved away.

Basil lingered a moment, though he saw that Olive wished to get rid of him. "I won't disturb you further than to ask you a single question," he said. "Where are you staying? I want to come and see Miss Tarrant. I don't say I want to come and see you, because I have an idea that it would give you no pleasure." It had occurred to him that he might obtain their address from Mrs. Luna—he only knew vaguely it was Tenth Street; much as he had displeased her she couldn't refuse him that; but suddenly the greater simplicity and frankness of applying directly to Olive, even at the risk of appearing to brave her, recommended itself. He couldn't, of course, call upon Verena without her knowing it, and she might as well make her protest (since he proposed to pay no heed to it), sooner as later. He had seen nothing, personally, of their life together, but it had come over him that what Miss Chancellor most disliked in him (had she not, on the very threshold of their acquaintance, had a sort of mystical foreboding of it?) was the possibility that he would interfere. It was quite on the cards that he might; yet it was decent, all the same, to ask her rather than anyone else. It was better that his interference should be accompanied with all the forms of chivalry.

Olive took no notice of his remark as to how she herself might be affected by his visit; but she asked in a moment why he should think it necessary to call on Miss Tarrant. "You know you are not in sympathy," she added, in a tone which contained a really touching element of entreaty that he would not even pretend to prove he was.

I know not whether Basil was touched, but he said, with every appearance of a conciliatory purpose —"I wish to thank her for all the interesting information she has given me this evening."

"If you think it generous to come and scoff at her, of course she has no defense; you will be glad to know that."

"Dear Miss Chancellor, if you are not a defense—a battery of many guns!" Ransom exclaimed.

"Well, she at least is not mine!" Olive returned, springing to her feet. She looked round her as if she were really pressed too hard, panting like a hunted creature.

"Your defense is your certain immunity from attack. Perhaps if you won't tell me where you are staying, you will kindly ask Miss Tarrant herself to do so. Would she send me a word on a card?"

"We are in West Tenth Street," Olive said; and she gave the number. "Of course you are free to come."

"Of course I am! Why shouldn't I be? But I am greatly obliged to you for the information. I will ask her to come out, so that you won't see us." And he turned away, with the sense that it was really insufferable, her attempt always to give him the air of being in the wrong. If that was the kind of spirit in which

women were going to act when they had more power!

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Mrs. Luna was early in the field the next day, and her sister wondered to what she owed the honor of a visit from her at eleven o'clock in the morning. She very soon saw, when Adeline asked her whether it had been she who procured for Basil Ransom an invitation to Mrs. Burrage's.

"Me—why in the world should it have been me?" Olive asked, feeling something of a pang at the implication that it had not been Adeline, as she supposed.

"I didn't know—but you took him up so."

"Why, Adeline Luna, when did I ever——?" Miss Chancellor exclaimed, staring and intensely grave.

"You don't mean to say you have forgotten how you brought him on to see you, a year and a half ago!"

"I didn't bring him on—I said if he happened to be there."

"Yes, I remember how it was: he did happen, and then you happened to hate him, and tried to get out of it."

Miss Chancellor saw, I say, why Adeline had come to her at the hour she knew she was always writing letters, after having given her all the attention that was necessary the day before; she had come simply to make herself disagreeable, as Olive knew, of old, the spirit sometimes moved her irresistibly to do. It seemed to her that Adeline had been disagreeable enough in not having beguiled Basil Ransom into a marriage, according to that memorable calculation of probabilities in which she indulged (with a license that she scarcely liked definitely to recall), when the pair made acquaintance under her eyes in Charles Street, and Mrs. Luna seemed to take to him as much as she herself did little. She would gladly have accepted him as a brother-in-law, for the harm such a relation could do one was limited and definite; whereas in his general capacity of being at large in her life the ability of the young Mississippian to injure her seemed somehow immense. "I wrote to him—that time —for a perfectly definite reason," she said. "I thought mother would have liked us to know him. But it was a mistake."

"How do you know it was a mistake? Mother would have liked him, I dare say."

"I mean my acting as I did; it was a theory of duty which I allowed to press me too much. I always do. Duty should be obvious; one shouldn't hunt round for it."

"Was it very obvious when it brought you on here?" asked Mrs. Luna, who was distinctly out of humor.

Olive looked for a moment at the toe of her shoe. "I had an idea that you would have married him by this time," she presently remarked.

"Marry him yourself, my dear! What put such an idea into your head?"

"You wrote to me at first so much about him. You told me he was tremendously attentive, and that you liked him."

"His state of mind is one thing and mine is another. How can I marry every man that hangs about me—that dogs my footsteps? I might as well become a Mormon at once!" Mrs. Luna delivered herself of this argument with a certain charitable air, as if her sister could not be expected to understand such a situation by her own light.

Olive waived the discussion, and simply said: "I took for granted *you* had got him the invitation."

"I, my dear? That would be quite at variance with my attitude of discouragement."

"Then she simply sent it herself."

"Whom do you mean by 'she'?"

"Mrs. Burrage, of course."

"I thought that you might mean Verena," said Mrs. Luna, casually.

"Verena—to him? Why in the world——?" And Olive gave the cold glare with which her sister was familiar.

"Why in the world not—since she knows him?"

"She had seen him twice in her life before last night, when she met him for the third time and spoke to him."

"Did she tell you that?"

"She tells me everything."

"Are you very sure?"

"Adeline Luna, what *do* you mean?" Miss Chancellor murmured.

"Are you very sure that last night was only the third time?" Mrs. Luna went on.

Olive threw back her head and swept her sister from her bonnet to her lowest flounce. "You have no right to hint at such a thing as that unless you know!"

"Oh, I know—I know, at any rate, more than you do!" And then Mrs. Luna, sitting with her sister, much

withdrawn, in one of the windows of the big, hot, faded parlor of the boarding house in Tenth Street, where there was a rug before the chimney representing a Newfoundland dog saving a child from drowning, and a row of chromo-litho-graphs on the walls, imparted to her the impression she had received the evening before—the impression of Basil Ransom's keen curiosity about Verena Tarrant. Verena must have asked Mrs. Burrage to send him a card, and asked it without mentioning the fact to Olive—for wouldn't Olive certainly have remembered it? It was no use her saying that Mrs. Burrage might have sent it of her own movement, because she wasn't aware of his existence, and why should she be? Basil Ransom himself had told her he didn't know Mrs. Burrage. Mrs. Luna knew whom he knew and whom he didn't, or at least the sort of people, and they were not the sort that belonged to the Wednesday Club. That was one reason why she didn't care about him for any intimate relation—that he didn't seem to have any taste for making nice friends. Olive would know what *her* taste was in this respect, though it wasn't that young woman's own any more than his. It was positive that the suggestion about the card could only have come from Verena. At any rate Olive could easily ask, or if she was afraid of her telling a fib she could ask Mrs. Burrage. It was true Mrs. Burrage might have been put on her guard by Verena, and would perhaps invent some other account of the matter; therefore Olive had better just believe what *she* believed, that Verena had secured his presence at the party and had had private reasons for doing so. It is to be feared that Ransom's remark to Mrs. Luna the night before about her having lost her head was near to the mark; for if she had not been blinded by her rancor she would have guessed the horror with which she inspired her sister when she spoke in that offhand way of Verena's lying and Mrs. Burrage's lying. Did people lie like that in Mrs. Luna's set? It was Olive's plan of life not to lie, and attributing a similar disposition to people she liked, it was impossible for her to believe that Verena had had the intention of deceiving her. Mrs. Luna, in a calmer hour, might also have divined that Olive would make her private comments on the strange story of Basil Ransom's having made up to Verena out of pique at Adeline's rebuff; for this was the account of the matter that she now offered to Miss Chancellor. Olive did two things: she listened intently and eagerly, judging there was distinct danger in the air (which, however, she had not wanted Mrs. Luna to tell her, having perceived it for herself the night before); and she saw that poor Adeline was fabricating fearfully, that the "rebuff" was altogether an invention. Mr. Ransom was evidently preoccupied with Verena, but he had not needed Mrs. Luna's cruelty to make him so. So Olive maintained an attitude of great reserve; she did not take upon herself to announce that her own version was that Adeline, for reasons absolutely imperceptible to others, had tried to catch Basil Ransom, had failed in her attempt, and, furious at seeing Verena preferred to a person of her importance (Olive remembered the *spretoe injuria formoe*), now wished to do both him and the girl an ill turn. This would be accomplished if she could induce Olive to interfere. Miss Chancellor was conscious of an abundant readiness to interfere, but it was not because she cared for Adeline's mortification. I am not sure, even, that she did not think her *fiasco* but another illustration of her sister's general uselessness, and rather despise her for it; being perfectly able at once to hold that nothing is baser than the effort to entrap a man, and to think it very ignoble to have to renounce it because you can't. Olive kept these reflections to herself, but she went so far as to say to her sister that she didn't see where the "pique" came in. How could it hurt Adeline that he should turn his attention to Verena? What was Verena to her?

"Why, Olive Chancellor, how can you ask?" Mrs. Luna boldly responded. "Isn't Verena everything to you, and aren't you everything to me, and wouldn't an attempt—a successful one—to take Verena away from you knock you up fearfully, and shouldn't I suffer, as you know I suffer, by sympathy?"

I have said that it was Miss Chancellor's plan of life not to lie, but such a plan was compatible with a kind of consideration for the truth which led her to shrink from producing it on poor occasions. So she didn't say, "Dear me, Adeline, what humbug! you know you hate Verena and would be very glad if she were drowned!" She only said, "Well, I see; but it's very roundabout." What she did see was that Mrs. Luna was eager to help her to stop off Basil Ransom from "making head," as the phrase was; and the fact that her motive was spite, and not tenderness for the Bostonians, would not make her assistance less welcome if the danger were real. She herself had a nervous dread, but she had that about everything; still, Adeline had perhaps seen something, and what in the world did she mean by her reference to Verena's having had secret meetings? When pressed on this point, Mrs. Luna could only say that she didn't pretend to give definite information, and she wasn't a spy anyway, but that the night before he had positively flaunted in her face his admiration for the girl, his enthusiasm for her way of standing up there. Of course he hated her ideas, but he was quite conceited enough to think she would give them up. Perhaps it was all directed at *her*—as if she cared! It would depend a good deal on the girl herself; certainly, if there was any likelihood of Verena's being affected, she should advise Olive to look out. She knew best what to do; it was only Adeline's duty to give her the benefit of her own impression, whether she was thanked for it or not. She only wished to put her on her guard, and it was just like Olive to receive such information so coldly; she was the most disappointing woman she knew.

Miss Chancellor's coldness was not diminished by this rebuke; for it had come over her that, after all, she had never opened herself at that rate to Adeline, had never let her see the real intensity of her desire to keep the sort of danger there was now a question of away from Verena, had given her no warrant for

regarding her as her friend's keeper; so that she was taken aback by the flatness if Mrs. Luna's assumption that she was ready to enter into a conspiracy to circumvent and frustrate the girl. Olive put on all her majesty to dispel this impression, and if she could not help being aware that she made Mrs. Luna still angrier, on the whole, than at first, she felt that she would much rather disappoint her than give herself away to her—especially as she was intensely eager to profit by her warning!

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Mrs. Luna would have been still less satisfied with the manner in which Olive received her proffered assistance had she known how many confidences that reticent young woman might have made her in return. Olive's whole life now was a matter for whispered communications; she felt this herself, as she sought the privacy of her own apartment after her interview with her sister. She had for the moment time to think; Verena having gone out with Mr. Burrage, who had made an appointment the night before to call for her to drive at that early hour. They had other engagements in the afternoon—the principal of which was to meet a group of earnest people at the house of one of the great local promoters. Olive would whisk Verena off to these appointments directly after lunch; she flattered herself that she could arrange matters so that there would not be half an hour in the day during which Basil Ransom, complacently calling, would find the Bostonians in the house. She had had this well in mind when, at Mrs. Burrage's, she was driven to give him their address; and she had had it also in mind that she would ask Verena, as a special favor, to accompany her back to Boston on the next day but one, which was the morning of the morrow. There had been considerable talk of her staying a few days with Mrs. Burrage—staying on after her own departure; but Verena backed out of it spontaneously, seeing how the idea worried her friend. Olive had accepted the sacrifice, and their visit to New York was now cut down, in intention, to four days, one of which, the moment she perceived whither Basil Ransom was tending, Miss Chancellor promised herself also to suppress. She had not mentioned that to Verena yet; she hesitated a little, having a slightly bad conscience about the concessions she had already obtained from her friend. Verena made such concessions with a generosity which caused one's heart to ache for admiration, even while one asked for them; and never once had Olive known her to demand the smallest credit for any virtue she showed in this way, or to bargain for an instant about any effort she made to oblige. She had been delighted with the idea of spending a week under Mrs. Burrage's roof; she had said, too, that she believed her mother would die happy (not that there was the least prospect of Mrs. Tarrant's dying), if she could hear of her having such an experience as that; and yet, perceiving how solemn Olive looked about it, how she blanched and brooded at the prospect, she had offered to give it up, with a smile sweeter, if possible, than any that had ever sat in her eyes. Olive knew what that meant for her, knew what a power of enjoyment she still had, in spite of the tension of their common purpose, their vital work, which had now, as they equally felt, passed into the stage of realization, of fruition; and that is why her conscience rather pricked her for consenting to this further act of renunciation, especially as their position seemed really so secure, on the part of one who had already given herself away so sublimely.

Secure as their position might be, Olive called herself a blind idiot for having, in spite of all her first shrinkings, agreed to bring Verena to New York. Verena had jumped at the invitation, the very unexpectedness of which on Mrs. Burrage's part—it was such an odd idea to have come to a mere worldling—carried a kind of persuasion with it. Olive's immediate sentiment had been an instinctive general fear; but, later, she had dismissed that as unworthy; she had decided (and such a decision was nothing new), that where their mission was concerned they ought to face everything. Such an opportunity would contribute too much to Verena's reputation and authority to justify a refusal at the bidding of apprehensions which were after all only vague. Olive's specific terrors and dangers had by this time very much blown over; Basil Ransom had given no sign of life for ages, and Henry Burrage had certainly got his quietus before they went to Europe. If it had occurred to his mother that she might convert Verena into the animating principle of a big soirée, she was at least acting in good faith, for it could be no more her wish today that he should marry Selah Tarrant's daughter than it was her wish a year before. And then they should do some good to the benighted, the most benighted, the fashionable benighted; they should perhaps make them furious—there was always some good in that. Lastly, Olive was conscious of a personal temptation in the matter; she was not insensible to the pleasure of appearing in a distinguished New York circle as a representative woman, an important Bostonian, the prompter, colleague, associate of one of the most original girls of the time. Basil Ransom was the person she had least expected to meet at Mrs. Burrage's; it had been her belief that they might easily spend four days in a city of more than a million of inhabitants without that disagreeable accident. But it had occurred; nothing was wanting to make it seem serious; and, setting her teeth, she shook herself, morally, hard, for having fallen into the trap of fate. Well, she would scramble out, with only a scare, probably. Henry Burrage was very attentive, but somehow she didn't fear him now; and it was only natural he should feel that he couldn't be polite enough, after they had consented to be exploited in that worldly way by his mother. The other danger was the worst; the palpitation of her strange dread, the night of Miss Birdseye's party, came back to her. Mr.

Burrage seemed, indeed, a protection; she reflected, with relief, that it had been arranged that after taking Verena to drive in the Park and see the Museum of Art in the morning, they should in the evening dine with him at Delmonico's (he was to invite another gentleman), and go afterwards to the German opera. Olive had kept all this to herself, as I have said; revealing to her sister neither the vividness of her prevision that Basil Ransom would look blank when he came down to Tenth Street and learned they had flitted, nor the eagerness of her desire just to find herself once more in the Boston train. It had been only this prevision that sustained her when she gave Mr. Ransom their number.

Verena came to her room shortly before luncheon, to let her know she had returned; and while they sat there, waiting to stop their ears when the gong announcing the repast was beaten, at the foot of the stairs, by a negro in a white jacket, she narrated to her friend her adventures with Mr. Burrage—expatiated on the beauty of the park, the splendor and interest of the Museum, the wonder of the young man's acquaintance with everything it contained, the swiftness of his horses, the softness of his English cart, the pleasure of rolling at that pace over roads as firm as marble, the entertainment he promised them for the evening. Olive listened in serious silence; she saw Verena was quite carried away; of course she hadn't gone so far with her without knowing that phase.

"Did Mr. Burrage try to make love to you?" Miss Chancellor inquired at last, without a smile.

Verena had taken off her hat to arrange her feather, and as she placed it on her head again, her uplifted arms making a frame for her face, she said: "Yes, I suppose it was meant for love."

Olive waited for her to tell more, to tell how she had treated him, kept him in his place, made him feel that that question was over long ago; but as Verena gave her no farther information she did not insist, conscious as she always was that in such a relation as theirs there should be a great respect on either side for the liberty of each. She had never yet infringed on Verena's, and of course she wouldn't begin now. Moreover, with the request that she meant presently to make of her she felt that she must be discreet. She wondered whether Henry Burrage were really going to begin again; whether his mother had only been acting in his interest in getting them to come on. Certainly, the bright spot in such a prospect was that if she listened to him she couldn't listen to Basil Ransom; and he *had* told Olive herself last night, when he put them into their carriage, that he hoped to prove to her yet that he had come round to her gospel. But the old sickness stole upon her again, the faintness of discouragement, as she asked herself why in the name of pity Verena should listen to any one at all but Olive Chancellor. Again it came over her, when she saw the brightness, the happy look, the girl brought back, as it had done in the earlier months, that the great trouble was that weak spot of Verena's, that sole infirmity and subtle flaw, which she had expressed to her very soon after they began to live together, in saying (she remembered it through the ineffaceable impression made by her friend's avowal),"I'll tell you what is the matter with you—you don't dislike men as a class!" Verena had replied on this occasion, "Well, no, I don't dislike them when they are pleasant!" As if organized atrociousness could ever be pleasant! Olive disliked them most when they were least unpleasant. After a little, at present, she remarked, referring to Henry Burrage: "It is not right of him, not decent, after your making him feel how, while he was at Cambridge, he wearied you, tormented you."

"Oh, I didn't show anything," said Verena, gaily. "I am learning to dissimulate," she added in a moment. "I suppose you have to as you go along. I pretend not to notice."

At this moment the gong sounded for luncheon, and the two young women covered up their ears, face to face, Verena with her quick smile, Olive with her pale patience. When they could hear themselves speak, the latter said abruptly:

"How did Mrs. Burrage come to invite Mr. Ransom to her party? He told Adeline he had never seen her before."

"Oh, I asked her to send him an invitation—after she had written to me, to thank me, when it was definitely settled we should come on. She asked me in her letter if there were any friends of mine in the city to whom I should like her to send cards, and I mentioned Mr. Ransom."

Verena spoke without a single instant's hesitation, and the only sign of embarrassment she gave was that she got up from her chair, passing in this manner a little out of Olive's scrutiny. It was easy for her not to falter, because she was glad of the chance. She wanted to be very simple in all her relations with her friend, and of course it was not simple so soon as she began to keep things back. She could at any rate keep back as little as possible, and she felt as if she were making up for a dereliction when she answered Olive's inquiry so promptly.

"You never told me of that," Miss Chancellor remarked, in a low tone.

"I didn't want to. I know you don't like him, and I thought it would give you pain. Yet I wanted him to be there—I wanted him to hear."

"What does it matter—why should you care about him?"

"Well, because he is so awfully opposed!"

"How do you know that, Verena?"

At this point Verena began to hesitate. It was not, after all, so easy to keep back only a little; it appeared rather as if one must either tell everything or hide everything. The former course had already presented itself to her as unduly harsh; it was because it seemed so that she had ended by keeping the

incident of Basil Ransom's visit to Monadnoc Place buried in unspoken, in unspeakable, considerations, the only secret she had in the world—the only thing that was all her own. She was so glad to say what she could without betraying herself that it was only after she had spoken that she perceived there was a danger of Olive's pushing the inquiry to the point where, to defend herself as it were, she should be obliged to practice a positive deception; and she was conscious at the same time that the moment her secret was threatened it became dearer to her. She began to pray silently that Olive might not push; for it would be odious, it would be impossible, to defend herself by a lie. Meanwhile, however, she had to answer, and the way she answered was by exclaiming, much more quickly than the reflections I note might have appeared to permit, "Well, if you can't tell from his appearance! He's the type of the reactionary."

Verena went to the toilet-glass to see that she had put on her hat properly, and Olive slowly got up, in the manner of a person not in the least eager for food. "Let him react as he likes—for heaven's sake don't mind him!" That was Miss Chancellor's rejoinder, and Verena felt that it didn't say all that was in her mind. She wished she would come down to luncheon, for she, at least, was honestly hungry. She even suspected Olive had an idea she was afraid to express, such distress it would bring with it. "Well, you know, Verena, this isnt our *real* life—it isn't our work," Olive went on.

"Well, no, it isn't, certainly," said Verena, not pretending at first that she did not know what Olive meant. In a moment, however, she added, "Do you refer to this social intercourse with Mr. Burrage?"

"Not to that only!" Then Olive asked abruptly, looking at her, "How did you know his address?"

"His address?"

"Mr. Ransom's—to enable Mrs. Burrage to invite him?"

They stood for a moment interchanging a gaze. "It was in a letter I got from him."

At these words there came into Olive's face an expression which made her companion cross over to her directly and take her by the hand. But the tone was different from what Verena expected when she said, with cold surprise: "Oh, you are in correspondence!" It showed an immense effort of self-control.

"He wrote to me once—I never told you," Verena rejoined, smiling. She felt that her friend's strange, uneasy eyes searched very far; a little more and they would go to the very bottom. Well, they might go if they would; she didn't, after all, care so much about her secret as that. For the moment, however, Verena did not learn what Olive had discovered, inasmuch as she only remarked presently that it was really time to go down. As they descended the staircase she put her arm into Miss Chancellor's and perceived that she was trembling.

Of course there were plenty of people in New York interested in the uprising, and Olive had made appointments, in advance, which filled the whole afternoon. Everybody wanted to meet them, and wanted everybody else to do so, and Verena saw they could easily have quite a vogue, if they only chose to stay and work that vein. Very likely, as Olive said, it wasn't their real life, and people didn't seem to have such a grip of the movement as they had in Boston; but there was something in the air that carried one along, and a sense of vastness and variety, of the infinite possibilities of a great city, which—Verena hardly knew whether she ought to confess it to herself—might in the end make up for the want of the Boston earnestness. Certainly, the people seemed very much alive, and there was no other place where so many cheering reports could flow in, owing to the number of electric feelers that stretched away everywhere. The principal center appeared to be Mrs. Croucher's, on Fifty-sixth Street, where there was an informal gathering of sympathizers who didn't seem as if they could forgive her when they learned that she had been speaking the night before in a circle in which none of them were acquainted. Certainly, they were very different from the group she had addressed at Mrs. Burrage's, and Verena heaved a thin, private sigh, expressive of some helplessness, as she thought what a big, complicated world it was, and how it evidently contained a little of everything. There was a general demand that she should repeat her address in a more congenial atmosphere; to which she replied that Olive made her engagements for her, and that as the address had been intended just to lead people on, perhaps she would think Mrs. Croucher's friends had reached a higher point. She was as cautious as this because she saw that Olive was now just straining to get out of the city; she didn't want to say anything that would tie them. When she felt her trembling that way before luncheon it made her quite sick to realize how much her friend was wrapped up in her—how terribly she would suffer from the least deviation. After they had started for their round of engagements the very first thing Verena spoke of in the carriage (Olive had taken one, in her liberal way, for the whole time), was the fact that her correspondence with Mr. Ransom, as her friend had called it, had consisted on his part of only one letter. It was a very short one, too; it had come to her a little more than a month before. Olive knew she got letters from gentlemen; she didn't see why she should attach such importance to this one. Miss Chancellor was leaning back in the carriage, very still, very grave, with her head against the cushioned surface, only turning her eyes towards the girl.

"You attach importance yourself; otherwise you would have told me."

"I knew you wouldn't like it—because you don't like *him."*

"I don't think of him," said Olive; "he's nothing to me." Then she added, suddenly, "Have you noticed that I am afraid to face what I don't like?"

Verena could not say that she had, and yet it was not just on Olive's part to speak as if she were an easy person to tell such a thing to: the way she lay there, white and weak, like a wounded creature, sufficiently proved the contrary. "You have such a fearful power of suffering," she replied in a moment.

To this at first Miss Chancellor made no rejoinder; but after a little she said, in the same attitude, "Yes, *you* could make me."

Verena took her hand and held it awhile. "I never will, till I have been through everything myself."

"*You* were not made to suffer—you were made to enjoy," Olive said, in very much the same tone in which she had told her that what was the matter with her was that she didn't dislike men as a class—a tone which implied that the contrary would have been much more natural and perhaps rather higher. Perhaps it would; but Verena was unable to rebut the charge; she felt this, as she looked out of the window of the carriage at the bright, amusing city, where the elements seemed so numerous, the animation so immense, the shops so brilliant, the women so strikingly dressed, and knew that these things quickened her curiosity, all her pulses.

"Well, I suppose I mustn't presume on it," she remarked, glancing back at Olive with her natural sweetness, her un-contradicting grace.

That young lady lifted her hand to her lips—held it there a moment; the movement seemed to say, "When you are so divinely docile, how can I help the dread of losing you?" This idea, however, was unspoken, and Olive Chancellor's uttered words, as the carriage rolled on, were different.

"Verena, I don't understand why he wrote to you."

"He wrote to me because he likes me. Perhaps you'll say you don't understand why he likes me," the girl continued, laughing. "He liked me the first time he saw me."

"Oh, that time!" Olive murmured.

"And still more the second."

"Did he tell you that in his letter?" Miss Chancellor inquired.

"Yes, my dear, he told me that. Only he expressed it more gracefully." Verena was very happy to say that; a written phrase of Basil Ransom's sufficiently justified her.

"It was my intuition—it was my foreboding!" Olive exclaimed, closing her eyes.

"I thought you said you didn't dislike him."

"It isn't dislike—it's simple dread. Is that all there is between you?"

"Why, Olive Chancellor, what do you think?" Verena asked, feeling now distinctly like a coward. Five minutes afterwards she said to Olive that if it would give her pleasure they would leave New York on the morrow, without taking a fourth day; and as soon as she had done so she felt better, especially when she saw how gratefully Olive looked at her for the concession, how eagerly she rose to the offer in saying, "Well, if you *do* feel that it isn't our own life—our very own!" It was with these words, and others besides, and with an unusually weak, indefinite kiss, as if she wished to protest that, after all, a single day didn't matter, and yet accepted the sacrifice and was a little ashamed of it—it was in this manner that the agreement as to an immediate retreat was sealed. Verena could not shut her eyes to the fact that for a month she had been less frank, and if she wished to do penance this abbreviation of their pleasure in New York, even if it made her almost completely miss Basil Ransom, was easier than to tell Olive just now that the letter was *not* all, that there had been a long visit, a talk, and a walk besides, which she had been covering up for ever so many weeks. And of what consequence, anyway, was the missing? Was it such a pleasure to converse with a gentleman who only wanted to let you know—and why he should want it so much Verena couldn't guess—that he thought you quite preposterous? Olive took her from place to place, and she ended by forgetting everything but the present hour, and the bigness and variety of New York, and the entertainment of rolling about in a carriage with silk cushions, and meeting new faces, new expressions of curiosity and sympathy, assurances that one was watched and followed. Mingled with this was a bright consciousness, sufficient for the moment, that one was moreover to dine at Delmonico's and go to the German opera. There was enough of the epicurean in Verena's composition to make it easy for her in certain conditions to live only for the hour.

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When she returned with her companion to the establishment in Tenth Street she saw two notes lying on the table in the hall; one of which she perceived to be addressed to Miss Chancellor, the other to herself. The hand was different, but she recognized both. Olive was behind her on the steps, talking to the coachman about sending another carriage for them in half an hour (they had left themselves but just time to dress); so that she simply possessed herself of her own note and ascended to her room. As she did so she felt that all the while she had known it would be there, and was conscious of a kind of treachery, an unfriendly wilfulness, in not being more prepared for it. If she could roll about New York the whole afternoon and forget that there might be difficulties ahead, that didn't alter the fact that there *were* difficulties, and that they might even become considerable—might not be settled by her simply going back to Boston. Half an hour later, as she drove up the Fifth Avenue with Olive (there seemed to be so much crowded into that one day), smoothing her light gloves, wishing her fan were a little nicer, and proving by the answering, familiar brightness with which she looked out on the lamp-lighted streets that, whatever theory might be entertained as to the genesis of her talent and her personal nature, the blood of the lecture-going, night-walking Tarrants did distinctly flow in her veins; as the pair proceeded, I say, to the celebrated restaurant, at the door of which Mr. Burrage had promised to be in vigilant expectancy of their carriage, Verena found a sufficiently gay and natural tone of voice for remarking to her friend that Mr. Ransom had called upon her while they were out, and had left a note in which there were many compliments for Miss Chancellor.

"That's wholly your own affair, my dear," Olive replied, with a melancholy sigh, gazing down the vista of Fourteenth Street (which they happened just then to be traversing, with much agitation), toward the queer barrier of the elevated railway.

It was nothing new to Verena that if the great striving of Olive's life was for justice she yet sometimes failed to arrive at it in particular cases; and she reflected that it was rather late for her to say, like that, that Basil Ransom's letters were only his correspondent's business. Had not his kinswoman quite made the subject her own during their drive that afternoon? Verena determined now that her companion should hear all there was to be heard about the letter; asking herself whether, if she told her at present more than she cared to know, it wouldn't make up for her hitherto having told her less. "He brought it with him, written, in case I should be out. He wants to see me tomorrow—he says he has ever so much to say to me. He proposes an hour—says he hopes it won't be inconvenient for me to see him about eleven in the morning; thinks I may have no other engagement so early as that. Of course our return to Boston settles it," Verena added, with serenity.

Miss Chancellor said nothing for a moment; then she replied, "Yes, unless you invite him to come on with you in the train."

"Why, Olive, how bitter you are!" Verena exclaimed, in genuine surprise.

Olive could not justify her bitterness by saying that her companion had spoken as if she were disappointed, because Verena had not. So she simply remarked, "I don't see what he can have to say to you—that would be worth your hearing."

"Well, of course, it's the other side. He has got it on the brain!" said Verena, with a laugh which seemed to relegate the whole matter to the category of the unimportant.

"If we should stay, would you see him—at eleven o'clock?" Olive inquired.

"Why do you ask that—when I have given it up?"

"Do you consider it such a tremendous sacrifice?"

"No," said Verena good-naturedly; "but I confess I am curious."

"Curious—how do you mean?"

"Well, to hear the other side."

"Oh heaven!" Olive Chancellor murmured, turning her face upon her.

"You must remember I have never heard it." And Verena smiled into her friend's wan gaze.

"Do you want to hear all the infamy that is in the world?"

"No, it isn't that; but the more he should talk the better chance he would give me. I guess I can meet him."

"Life is too short. Leave him as he is."

"Well," Verena went on, "there are many I haven't cared to move at all, whom I might have been more interested in than in him. But to make him give in just at two or three points—that I should like better than anything I have done."

"You have no business to enter upon a contest that isn't equal; and it wouldn't be, with Mr. Ransom."

"The inequality would be that I have right on my side."

"What is that—for a man? For what was their brutality given them, but to make that up?"

"I don't think he's brutal; I should like to see," said Verena gaily.

Olive's eyes lingered a little on her own; then they turned away, vaguely, blindly, out of the carriage-window, and Verena made the reflection that she looked strangely little like a person who was going to dine at Delmonico's. How terribly she worried about everything, and how tragical was her nature; how anxious, suspicious, exposed to subtle influences! In their long intimacy Verena had come to revere most of her friend's peculiarities; they were a proof of her depth and devotion, and were so bound up with what was noble in her that she was rarely provoked to criticize them separately. But at present, suddenly, Olive's earnestness began to appear as inharmonious with the scheme of the universe as if it had been a broken saw; and she was positively glad she had not told her about Basil Ransom's appearance in Monadnoc Place. If she worried so about what she knew, how much would she not have woried about the rest! Verena had by this time made up her mind that her acquaintance with Mr. Ransom was the most episodical, most superficial, most unimportant of all possible relations.

Olive Chancellor watched Henry Burrage very closely that evening; she had a special reason for doing so, and her entertainment, during the successive hours, was derived much less from the delicate little feast over which this insinuating proselyte presided, in the brilliant public room of the establishment, where French waiters flitted about on deep carpets and parties at neighboring tables excited curiosity and conjecture, or even from the magnificent music of "Lohengrin," than from a secret process of comparison and verification, which shall presently be explained to the reader. As some discredit has possibly been thrown upon her impartiality it is a pleasure to be able to say that on her return from the opera she took a step dictated by an earnest consideration of justice—of the promptness with which Verena had told her of the note left by Basil Ransom in the afternoon. She drew Verena into her room with her. The girl, on the way back to Tenth Street, had spoken only of Wagner's music, of the singers, the orchestra, the immensity of the house, her tremendous pleasure. Olive could see how fond she might become of New York, where that kind of pleasure was so much more in the air.

"Well, Mr. Burrage was certainly very kind to us—no one could have been more thoughtful," Olive said; and she colored a little at the look with which Verena greeted this tribute of appreciation from Miss Chancellor to a single gentleman.

"I am so glad you were struck with that, because I do think we have been a little rough to him." Verena's *we* was angelic. "He was particularly attentive to you, my dear; he has got over me. He looked at you so sweetly. Dearest Olive, if you marry him——!" And Miss Tarrant, who was in high spirits, embraced her companion, to check her own silliness.

"He wants you to stay there, all the same. They haven't given *that* up," Olive remarked, turning to a drawer, out of which she took a letter.

"Did he tell you that, pray? He said nothing more about it to me."

"When we came in this afternoon I found this note from Mrs. Burrage. You had better read it." And she presented the document, open, to Verena.

The purpose of it was to say that Mrs. Burrage could really not reconcile herself to the loss of Verena's visit, on which both she and her son had counted so much. She was sure they would be able to make it as interesting to Miss Tarrant as it would be to themselves. She, Mrs. Burrage, moreover, felt as if she hadn't heard half she wanted about Miss Tarrant's views, and there were so many more who were present at the address, who had come to her that afternoon (losing not a minute, as Miss Chancellor could see), to ask how in the world they too could learn more—how they could get at the fair speaker and question her about certain details. She hoped so much, therefore, that even if the young ladies should be unable to alter their decision about the visit they might at least see their way to staying over long enough to allow her to arrange an informal meeting for some of these poor thirsty souls. Might she not at least talk over the question with Miss Chancellor? She gave her notice that she would attack her on the subject of the visit too. Might she not see her on the morrow, and might she ask of her the very great favor that the interview should be at Mrs. Burrage's own house? She had something very particular to say to her, as regards which perfect privacy was a great consideration, and Miss Chancellor would doubtless recognize that this would be best secured under Mrs. Burrage's roof. She would therefore send her carriage for Miss Chancellor at any hour that would be convenient to the latter. She really thought much good might come from their having a satisfactory talk.

Verena read this epistle with much deliberation; it seemed to her mysterious, and confirmed the idea she had received the night before—the idea that she had not got quite a correct impression of this clever, worldly, curious woman on the occasion of her visit to Cambridge, when they met her at her son's rooms. As she gave the letter back to Olive she said, "That's why he didn't seem to believe we are really leaving tomorrow. He knows she had written that, and he thinks it will keep us."

"Well, if I were to say it may—should you think me too miserably changeful?"

Verena stared, with all her candor, and it was so very queer that Olive should now wish to linger that

the sense of it, for the moment, almost covered the sense of its being pleasant. But that came out after an instant, and she said, with great honesty, "You needn't drag me away for consistency's sake. It would be absurd for me to pretend that I don't like being here."

"I think perhaps I ought to see her." Olive was very thoughtful.

"How lovely it must be to have a secret with Mrs. Burrage!" Verena exclaimed.

"It won't be a secret from you."

"Dearest, you needn't tell me unless you want," Verena went on, thinking of her own unimparted knowledge.

"I thought it was our plan to divide everything. It was certainly mine."

"Ah, don't talk about plans!" Verena exclaimed, rather ruefully. "You see, if we *are* going to stay tomorrow, how foolish it was to have any. There is more in her letter than is expressed," she added, as Olive appeared to be studying in her face the reasons for and against making this concession to Mrs. Burrage, and that was rather embarrassing.

"I thought it over all the evening—so that if now you will consent we will stay."

"Darling—what a spirit you have got! All through all those dear little dishes—all through 'Lohengrin!' As I haven't thought it over at all, you must settle it. You know I am not difficult."

"And would you go and stay with Mrs. Burrage, after all, if she should say anything to me that seems to make it desirable?"

Verena broke into a laugh. "You know it's not our real life!"

Olive said nothing for a moment; then she replied: "Don't think *I* can forget that. If I suggest a deviation, it's only because it sometimes seems to me that perhaps, after all, almost anything is better than the form reality *may* take with us." This was slightly obscure, as well as very melancholy, and Verena was relieved when her companion remarked, in a moment, "You must think me strangely inconsequent"; for this gave her a chance to reply, soothingly:

"Why, you don't suppose I expect you to keep always screwed up! I will stay a week with Mrs. Burrage, or a fortnight, or a month, or anything you like," she pursued; "anything it may seem to you best to tell her after you have seen her."

"Do you leave it all to me? You don't give me much help," Olive said.

"Help to what?"

"Help to help *you."*

"I don't want any help; I am quite strong enough!" Verena cried, gaily. The next moment she inquired, in an appeal half comical, half touching, "My dear colleague, why do you make me say such conceited things?"

"And if you do stay—just even tomorrow—shall you be —very much of the time—with Mr. Ransom?"

As Verena for the moment appeared ironically-minded, she might have found a fresh subject for hilarity in the tremulous, tentative tone in which Olive made this inquiry. But it had not that effect; it produced the first manifestation of impatience—the first, literally, and the first note of reproach—that had occurred in the course of their remarkable intimacy. The color rose to Verena's cheek, and her eye for an instant looked moist.

"I don't know what you always think, Olive, nor why you don't seem able to trust me. You didn't, from the first, with gentlemen. Perhaps you were right then—I don't say; but surely it is very different now. I don't think I ought to be suspected so much. Why have you a manner as if I had to be watched, as if I wanted to run away with every man that speaks to me? I should think I had proved how little I care. I thought you had discovered by this time that I am serious; that I have dedicated my life; that there is something unspeakably dear to me. But you begin again, every time—you don't do me justice. I must take everything that comes. I mustn't be afraid. I thought we had agreed that we were to do our work in the midst of the world, facing everything, keeping straight on, always taking hold. And now that it all opens out so magnificently, and victory is really sitting on our banners, it is strange of you to doubt of me, to suppose I am not more wedded to all our old dreams than ever. I told you the first time I saw you that I could renounce, and knowing better today, perhaps, what that means, I am ready to say it again. That I can, that I will! Why, Olive Chancellor," Verena cried, panting, a moment, with her eloquence, and with the rush of a culminating idea, "haven't you discovered by this time that I *have* renounced?"

The habit of public speaking, the training, the practice,. in which she had been immersed, enabled Verena to unroll a coil of propositions dedicated even to a private interest with the most touching, most cumulative effect. Olive was completely aware of this, and she stilled herself, while the girl uttered one soft, pleading sentence after another, into the same rapt attention she was in the habit of sending up from the benches of an auditorium. She looked at Verena fixedly, felt that she was stirred to her depths, that she was exquisitely passionate and sincere, that she was a quivering, spotless, consecrated maiden, that she really had renounced, that they were both safe, and that her own injustice and indelicacy had been great. She came to her slowly, took her in her arms and held her long—giving her a silent kiss. From which Verena knew that she believed her.

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The hour that Olive proposed to Mrs. Burrage, in a note sent early the next morning, for the interview to which she consented to lend herself, was the stroke of noon; this period of the day being chosen in consequence of a prevision of many subsequent calls upon her time. She remarked in her note that she did not wish any carriage to be sent for her, and she surged and swayed up the Fifth Avenue on one of the convulsive, clattering omnibuses which circulate in that thoroughfare. One of her reasons for mentioning twelve o'clock had been that she knew Basil Ransom was to call at Tenth Street at eleven, and (as she supposed he didn't intend to stay all day) this would give her time to see him come and go. It had been tacitly agreed between them, the night before, that Verena was quite firm enough in her faith to submit to his visit, and that such a course would be much more dignified than dodging it. This understanding passed from one to the other during that dumb embrace which I have described as taking place before they separated for the night. Shortly before noon, Olive, passing out of the house, looked into the big, sunny double parlor, where, in the morning, with all the husbands absent for the day and all the wives and spinsters launched upon the town, a young man desiring to hold a debate with a young lady might enjoy every advantage in the way of a clear field. Basil Ransom was still there; he and Verena, with the place to themselves, were standing in the recess of a window, their backs presented to the door. If he had got up, perhaps he was going, and Olive, softly closing the door again, waited a little in the hall, ready to pass into the back part of the house if she should hear him coming out. No sound, however, reached her ear; apparently he did mean to stay all day, and she should find him there on her return. She left the house, knowing they were looking at her from the window as she descended the steps, but feeling she could not bear to see Basil Ransom's face. As she walked, averting her own, toward the Fifth Avenue, on the sunny side, she was barely conscious of the loveliness of the day, the perfect weather, all suffused and tinted with spring, which sometimes descends upon New York when the winds of March have been stilled; she was given up only to the remembrance of that moment when she herself had stood at a window (the second time he came to see her in Boston), and watched Basil Ransom pass out with Adeline—with Adeline who had seemed capable then of getting such a hold on him but had proved as ineffectual in this respect as she was in every other. She recalled the vision she had allowed to dance before her as she saw the pair cross the street together, laughing and talking, and how it seemed to interpose itself against the fears which already then—so strangely—haunted her. Now that she saw it so fruitless—and that Verena, moreover, had turned out really so great—she was rather ashamed of it; she felt associated, however remotely, in the reasons which had made Mrs. Luna tell her so many fibs the day before, and there could be nothing elevating in that. As for the other reasons why her fidgety sister had failed and Mr. Ransom had held his own course, naturally Miss Chancellor didn't like to think of them.

If she had wondered what Mrs. Burrage wished so particularly to talk about, she waited some time for the clearing-up of the mystery. During this interval she sat in a remarkably pretty boudoir, where there were flowers and faïences and little French pictures, and watched her hostess revolve round the subject in circles the vagueness of which she tried to dissimulate. Olive believed she was a person who never could enjoy asking a favor, especially of a votary of the new ideas; and that was evidently what was coming. She had asked one already, but that had been handsomely paid for; the note from Mrs. Burrage which Verena found awaiting her in Tenth Street, on her arrival, contained the largest check this young woman had ever received for an address. The request that hung fire had reference to Verena too, of course; and Olive needed no prompting to feel that her friend's being a young person who took money could not make Mrs. Burrage's present effort more agreeable. To this taking of money (for when it came to Verena it was as if it came to her as well), she herself was now completely inured; money was a tremendous force, and when one wanted to assault the wrong with every engine one was happy not to lack the sinews of war. She liked her hostess better this morning than she had liked her before; she had more than ever the air of taking all sorts of sentiments and views for granted between them; which could only be flattering to Olive so long as it was really Mrs. Burrage who made each advance, while her visitor sat watchful and motionless. She had a light, clever, familiar way of traversing an immense distance with a very few words, as when she remarked, "Well then, it is settled that she will come, and will stay till she is tired."

Nothing of the kind had been settled, but Olive helped Mrs. Burrage (this time) more than she knew by saying, "Why do you want her to visit you, Mrs. Burrage? why do you want her socially? Are you not aware that your son, a year ago, desired to marry her?"

"My dear Miss Chancellor, that is just what I wish to talk to you about. I am aware of everything; I don't believe you ever met anyone who is aware of more things than I." And Olive had to believe this, as

Mrs. Burrage held up, smiling, her intelligent, proud, good-natured, successful head. "I knew a year ago that my son was in love with your friend, I know that he has been so ever since, and that in consequence he would like to marry her today. I daresay you don't like the idea of her marrying at all; it would break up a friendship which is so full of interest" (Olive wondered for a moment whether she had been going to say "so full of profit"), "for you. This is why I hesitated; but since you are willing to talk about it, that is just what I want."

"I don't see what good it will do," Olive said.

"How can we tell till we try? I never give a thing up till I have turned it over in every sense."

It was Mrs. Burrage, however, who did most of the talking; Olive only inserted from time to time an inquiry, a protest, a correction, an ejaculation tinged with irony. None of these things checked or diverted her hostess; Olive saw more and more that she wished to please her, to win her over, to smooth matters down, to place them in a new and original light. She was very clever and (little by little Olive said to herself), absolutely unscrupulous, but she didn't think she was clever enough for what she had undertaken. This was neither more nor less, in the first place, than to persuade Miss Chancellor that she and her son were consumed with sympathy for the movement to which Miss Chancellor had dedicated her life. But how could Olive believe that, when she saw the type to which Mrs. Burrage belonged—a type into which nature herself had inserted a face turned in the very opposite way from all earnest and improving things? People like Mrs. Burrage lived and fattened on abuses, prejudices, privileges, on the petrified, cruel fashions of the past. It must be added, however, that if her hostess was a humbug, Olive had never met one who provoked her less; she was such a brilliant, genial, artistic one, with such a recklessness of perfidy, such a willingness to bribe you if she couldn't deceive you. She seemed to be offering Olive all the kingdoms of the earth if she would only exert herself to bring about a state of feeling on Verena Tarrant's part which would lead the girl to accept Henry Burrage.

"We know it's you—the whole business; that you can do what you please. You could decide it tomorrow with a word."

She had hesitated at first, and spoken of her hesitation, and it might have appeared that she would need all her courage to say to Olive, that way, face to face, that Verena was in such subjection to her. But she didn't look afraid; she only looked as if it were an infinite pity Miss Chancellor couldn't understand what immense advantages and rewards there would be for her in striking an alliance with the house of Burrage. Olive was so impressed with this, so occupied, even, in wondering what these mystic benefits might be, and whether after all there might not be a protection in them (from something worse), a fund of some sort that she and Verena might convert to a large use, setting aside the mother and son when once they had got what they had to give—she was so arrested with the vague daze of this vision, the sense of Mrs. Burrage's full hands, her eagerness, her thinking it worth-while to flatter and conciliate, whatever her pretexts and pretentions might be, that she was almost insensible, for the time, to the strangeness of such a woman's coming round to a positive desire for a connection with the Tarrants. Mrs. Burrage had indeed explained this partly by saying that her son's condition was wearing her out, and that she would enter into anything that would make him happier, make him better. She was fonder of him than of the whole world beside, and it was an anguish to her to see him yearning for Miss Tarrant only to lose her. She made that charge about Olive's power in the matter in such a way that it seemed at the same time a tribute to her force of character.

"I don't know on what terms you suppose me to be with my friend," Olive returned, with considerable majesty. "She will do exactly as she likes, in such a case as the one you allude to. She is absolutely free; you speak as if I were her keeper!"

Then Mrs. Burrage explained that of course she didn't mean that Miss Chancellor exercised a conscious tyranny; but only that Verena had a boundless admiration for her, saw through her eyes, took the impress of all her opinions, preferences. She was sure that if Olive would only take a favorable view of her son Miss Tarrant would instantly throw herself into it. "It's very true that you may ask me," added Mrs. Burrage, smiling, "how you can take a favorable view of a young man who wants to marry the very person in the world you want most to keep unmarried!"

This description of Verena was of course perfectly correct; but it was not agreeable to Olive to have the fact in question so clearly perceived, even by a person who expressed it with an air intimating that there was nothing in the world *she* couldn't understand.

"Did your son know that you were going to speak to me about this?" Olive asked, rather coldly, waiving the question of her influence on Verena and the state in which she wished her to remain.

"Oh yes, poor dear boy; we had a long talk yesterday, and I told him I would do what I could for him. Do you remember the little visit I paid to Cambridge last spring, when I saw you at his rooms? Then it was I began to perceive how the wind was setting; but yesterday we had a real *éclaircissement.* I didn't like it at all, at first; I don't mind telling you that, now—now that I am really enthusiastic about it. When a girl is as charming, as original, as Miss Tarrant, it doesn't in the least matter who she is; she makes herself the standard by which you measure her; she makes her own position. And then Miss Tarrant has such a future!" Mrs. Burrage added, quickly, as if that were the last thing to be overlooked. "The whole question

has come up again —the feeling that Henry tried to think dead, or at least dying, has revived, through the —I hardly know what to call it, but I really may say the unexpectedly great effect of her appearance here. She was really wonderful on Wednesday evening; prejudice, conventionality, every presumption there might be against her, had to fall to the ground. I expected a success, but I didn't expect what you gave us," Mrs. Burrage went on, smiling, while Olive noted her "you." "In short, my poor boy flamed up again; and now I see that he will never again care for any girl as he cares for that one. My dear Miss Chancellor, *j'en ai pris mon parti,* and perhaps you know my way of doing that sort of thing. I am not at all good at resigning myself, but I am excellent at taking up a craze. I haven't renounced, I have only changed sides. For or against, I must be a partisan. Don't you know that kind of nature? Henry has put the affair into my hands, and you see I put it into yours. Do help me; let us work together."

This was a long, explicit speech for Mrs. Burrage, who dealt, usually, in the cursory and allusive; and she may very well have expected that Miss Chancellor would recognize its importance. What Olive did, in fact, was simply to inquire, by way of rejoinder: "Why did you ask us to come on?"

If Mrs. Burrage hesitated now, it was only for twenty seconds. "Simply because we are so interested in your work."

"That surprises me," said Olive, thoughtfully.

"I daresay you don't believe it; but such a judgment is superficial. I am sure we give proof in the offer we make," Mrs. Burrage remarked, with a good deal of point. "There are plenty of girls—without any views at all—who would be delighted to marry my son. He is very clever, and he has a large fortune. Add to that that he's an angel!"

That was very true, and Olive felt all the more that the attitude of these fortunate people, for whom the world was so well arranged just as it was, was very curious. But as she sat there it came over her that the human spirit has many variations, that the influence of the truth is great, and that there are such things in life as happy surprises, quite as well as disagreeable ones. Nothing, certainly, forced such people to fix their affections on the daughter of a "healer"; it would be very clumsy to pick her out of her generation only for the purpose of frustrating her. Moreover, her observation of their young host at Delmonico's and in the spacious box at the Academy of Music, where they had privacy and ease, and murmured words could pass without making neighbors more given up to the stage turn their heads—her consideration of Henry Burrage's manner, suggested to her that she had measured him rather scantily the year before, that he was as much in love as the feebler passions of the age permitted (for though Miss Chancellor believed in the amelioration of humanity, she thought there was too much water in the blood of all of us), that he prized Verena for her rarity, which was her genius, her gift, and would therefore have an interest in promoting it, and that he was of so soft and fine a paste that his wife might do what she liked with him. Of course there would be the mother-in-law to count with; but unless she was perjuring herself shamelessly Mrs. Burrage really had the wish to project herself into the new atmosphere, or at least to be generous personally; so that, oddly enough, the fear that most glanced before Olive was not that this high, free matron, slightly irritable with cleverness and at the same time good-natured with prosperity, would bully her son's bride, but rather that she might take too fond a possession of her. It was a fear which may be described as a presentiment of jealousy. It occurred, accordingly, to Miss Chancellor's quick conscience that, possibly, the proposal which presented itself in circumstances so complicated and anomalous was simply a magnificent chance, an improvement on the very best, even, that she had dreamed of for Verena. It meant a large command of money—much larger than her own; the association of a couple of clever people who simulated conviction very well, whether they felt it or not, and who had a hundred useful worldly ramifications, and a kind of social pedestal from which she might really shine afar. The conscience I have spoken of grew positively sick as it thought of having such a problem as that to consider, such an ordeal to traverse. In the presence of such a contingency the poor girl felt grim and helpless; she could only vaguely wonder whether she were called upon in the name of duty to lend a hand to the torture of her own spirit.

"And if she should marry him, how could I be sure that —afterwards—you would care so much about the question which has all our thoughts, hers and mine?" This inquiry evolved itself from Olive's rapid meditation; but even to herself it seemed a little rough.

Mrs. Burrage took it admirably. "You think we are feigning an interest, only to get hold of her? That's not very nice of you, Miss Chancellor; but of course you have to be tremendously careful. I assure you my son tells me he firmly believes your movement is the great question of the immediate future, that it has entered into a new phase; into what does he call it? the domain of practical politics. As for me, you don't suppose I don't want everything we poor women can get, or that I would refuse any privilege or advantage that's offered me? I don't rant or rave about anything, but I have—as I told you just now—my own quiet way of being zealous. If you had no worse partisan than I, you would do very well. My son has talked to me immensely about your ideas; and even if I should enter into them only because he does, I should do so quite enough. You may say you don't see Henry dangling about after a wife who gives public addresses; but I am convinced that a great many things are coming to pass—very soon, too—that we don't see in advance. Henry is a gentleman to his fingertips, and there is not a situation in which he will not conduct

himself with tact."

Olive could see that they really wanted Verena immensely, and it was impossible for her to believe that if they were to get her they would not treat her well. It came to her that they would even over-indulge her, flatter her, spoil her; she was perfectly capable, for the moment, of assuming that Verena was susceptible of deterioration and that her own treatment of her had been discriminatingly severe. She had a hundred protests, objections, replies; her only embarrassment could be as to which she should use first.

"I think you have never seen Doctor Tarrant and his wife," she remarked, with a calmness which she felt to be very pregnant.

"You mean they are absolutely fearful? My son has told me they are quite impossible, and I am quite prepared for that. Do you ask how we should get on with them? My dear young lady, we should get on as you do!"

If Olive had answers, so had Mrs. Burrage; she had still an answer when her visitor, taking up the supposition that it was in her power to dispose in any manner whatsoever of Verena, declared that she didn't know why Mrs. Burrage addressed herself to *her,* that Miss Tarrant was free as air, that her future was in her own hands, that such a matter as this was a kind of thing with which it could never occur to one to interfere. "Dear Miss Chancellor, we don't ask you to interfere. The only thing we ask of you is simply *not* to interfere."

"And have you sent for me only for that?"

"For that, and for what I hinted at in my note; that you would really exercise your influence with Miss Tarrant to induce her to come to us now for a week or two. That is really, after all, the main thing I ask. Lend her to us, here, for a little while, and we will take care of the rest. That sounds conceited—but she *would* have a good time."

"She doesn't live for that," said Olive.

"What I mean is that she should deliver an address every night!" Mrs. Burrage returned, smiling.

"I think you try to prove too much. You do believe—though you pretend you don't—that I control her actions, and as far as possible her desires, and that I am jealous of any other relations she may possibly form. I can imagine that we may perhaps have that air, though it only proves how little such an association as ours is understood, and how superficial is still"—Olive felt that her "still" was really historical—"the interpretation of many of the elements in the activity of women, how much the public conscience with regard to them needs to be educated. Your conviction with respect to my attitude being what I believe it to be," Miss Chancellor went on, "I am surprised at your not perceiving how little it is in my interest to deliver my—my victim up to you."

If we were this moment to take, in a single glance, an inside view of Mrs. Burrage (a liberty we have not yet ventured on), I suspect we should find that she was considerably exasperated at her visitor's superior tone, at seeing herself regarded by this dry, shy, obstinate, provincial young woman as superficial. If she liked Verena very nearly as much as she tried to convince Miss Chancellor, she was conscious of disliking Miss Chancellor more than she should probably ever be able to reveal to Verena. It was doubtless partly her irritation that found a voice as she said, after a self-administered pinch of caution not to say too much, "Of course it would be absurd in us to assume that Miss Tarrant would find my son irresistible, especially as she has already refused him. But even if she should remain obdurate, should you consider yourself quite safe as regards others?"

The manner in which Miss Chancellor rose from her chair on hearing these words showed her hostess that if she had wished to take a little revenge by frightening her, the experiment was successful. "What others do you mean?" Olive asked, standing very straight, and turning down her eyes as from a great height.

Mrs. Burrage—since we have begun to look into her mind we may continue the process—had not meant anyone in particular; but a train of association was suddenly kindled in her thought by the flash of the girl's resentment. She remembered the gentleman who had come up to her in the music-room, after Miss Tarrant's address, while she was talking with Olive, and to whom that young lady had given so cold a welcome. "I don't mean any one in particular; but, for instance, there is the young man to whom she asked me to send an invitation to my party, and who looked to me like a possible admirer." Mrs. Burrage also got up; then she stood a moment, closer to her visitor. "Don't you think it's a good deal to expect that, young, pretty, attractive, clever, charming as she is, you should be able to keep her always, to exclude other affections, to cut off a whole side of life, to defend her against dangers—if you call them dangers—to which every young woman who is not positively repulsive is exposed? My dear young lady, I wonder if I might give you three words of advice?" Mrs. Burrage did not wait till Olive had answered this inquiry; she went on quickly, with her air of knowing exactly what she wanted to say and feeling at the same time that, good as it might be, the manner of saying it, like the manner of saying most other things, was not worth troubling much about. "Don't attempt the impossible. You have got hold of a good thing; don't spoil it by trying to stretch it too far. If you don't take the better, perhaps you will have to take the worse; if it's safety you want I should think she was much safer with my son—for with us you know the worst —than as a possible prey to adventurers, to exploiters, or to people who, once they had got hold of her, would

shut her up altogether."

Olive dropped her eyes; she couldn't endure Mrs. Burrage's horrible expression of being near the mark, her look of worldly cleverness, of a confidence born of much experience. She felt that nothing would be spared her, that she should have to go to the end, that this ordeal also must be faced, and that, in particular, there was a detestable wisdom in her hostess's advice. She was conscious, however, of no obligation to recognize it then and there; she wanted to get off, and even to carry Mrs. Burrage's sapient words along with her—to hurry to some place where she might be alone and think. "I don't know why you have thought it right to send for me only to say this. I take no interest whatever in your son—in his settling in life." And she gathered her mantle more closely about her, turning away.

"It is exceedingly kind of you to have come," said Mrs. Burrage, imperturbably. "Think of what I have said; I am sure you won't feel that you have wasted your hour."

"I have a great many things to think of!" Olive exclaimed, insincerely; for she knew that Mrs. Burrage's ideas would haunt her.

"And tell her that if she will make us the little visit, all New York shall sit at her feet!"

That was what Olive wanted, and yet it seemed a mockery to hear Mrs. Burrage say it. Miss Chancellor retreated, making no response even when her hostess declared again that she was under great obligations to her for coming. When she reached the street she found she was deeply agitated, but not with a sense of weakness; she hurried along excited and dismayed, feeling that her insufferable conscience was bristling like some irritated animal, that a magnificent offer had really been made to Verena, and that there was no way for her to persuade herself She might be silent about it. Of course, if Verena should be tempted by the idea of being made so much of by the Burrages, the danger of Basil Ransom getting any kind of hold on her would cease to be pressing. That was what was present to Olive as she walked along, and that was what made her nervous, conscious only of this problem that had suddenly turned the bright day to grayness, heedless of the sophisticated-looking people who passed her on the wide Fifth Avenue pavement. It had risen in her mind the day before, planted first by Mrs. Burrage's note; and then, as we know, she had vaguely entertained the conception, asking Verena whether she would make the visit if it were again to be pressed upon them. It had been pressed, certainly, and the terms of the problem were now so much sharper that they seemed cruel. What had been in her own mind was that if Verena should appear to lend herself to the Burrages Basil Ransom might be discouraged—might think that, shabby and poor, there was no chance for him as against people with every advantage of fortune and position. She didn't see him relax his purpose so easily; she knew she didn't believe he was of that pusillanimous fiber. Still, it was a chance, and any chance that might help her had been worth considering. At present she saw it was a question not of Verena's lending herself, but of a positive gift, or at least of a bargain in which the terms would be immensely liberal. It would be impossible to use the Burrages as a shelter on the assumption that they were not dangerous, for they became dangerous from the moment they set up as sympathizers, took the ground that what they offered the girl was simply a boundless opportunity. It came back to Olive, again and again, that this was, and could only be, fantastic and false; but it was always possible that Verena might not think it so, might trust them all the way. When Miss Chancellor had a pair of alternatives to consider, a question of duty to study, she put a kind of passion into it —felt, above all, that the matter must be settled that very hour, before anything in life could go on. It seemed to her at present that she couldn't re-enter the house in Tenth Street without having decided first whether she might trust the Burrages or not. By "trust" them, she meant trust them to fail in winning Verena over, while at the same time they put Basil Ransom on a false scent. Olive was able to say to herself that he probably wouldn't have the hardihood to push after her into those gilded salons, which, in any event, would be closed to him as soon as the mother and son should discover what he wanted. She even asked herself whether Verena would not be still better defended from the young Southerner in New York, amid complicated hospitalities, than in Boston with a cousin of the enemy. She continued to walk down the Fifth Avenue, without noticing the cross streets, and after a while became conscious that she was approaching Washington Square. By this time she had also definitely reasoned it out that Basil Ransom and Henry Burrage could not both capture Miss Tarrant, that therefore there could not be two dangers, but only one; that this was a good deal gained, and that it behooved her to determine which peril had most reality, in order that she might deal with that one only. She held her way to the Square, which, as all the world knows, is of great extent and open to the encircling street. The trees and grass-plats had begun to bud and sprout, the fountains plashed in the sunshine, the children of the quarter, both the dingier types from the south side, who played games that required much chalking of the paved walks, and much sprawling and crouching there, under the feet of passers, and the little curled and feathered people who drove their hoops under the eyes of French nursemaids—all the infant population filled the vernal air with small sounds which had a crude, tender quality, like the leaves and the thin herbage. Olive wandered through the place, and ended by sitting down on one of the continuous benches. It was a long time since she had done anything so vague, so wasteful. There were a dozen things which, as she was staying over in New York, she ought to do; but she forgot them, or, if she thought of them, felt that they were now of no moment. She remained in her place an hour, brooding, tremulous, turning over and over certain thoughts.

It seemed to her that she was face to face with a crisis of her destiny, and that she must not shrink from seeing it exactly as it was. Before she rose to return to Tenth Street she had made up her mind that there was no menace so great as the menace of Basil Ransom; she had accepted in thought any arrangement which would deliver her from that. If the Burrages were to take Verena they would take her from Olive immeasurably less than he would do; it was from him, from him they would take her most. She walked back to her boarding house, and the servant who admitted her said, in answer to her inquiry as to whether Verena were at home, that Miss Tarrant had gone out with the gentleman who called in the morning, and had not yet come in. Olive stood staring; the clock in the hall marked three.

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"Come out with me, Miss Tarrant; come out with me. *Do* come out with me." That was what Basil Ransom had been saying to Verena when they stood where Olive perceived them, in the embrasure of the window. It had of course taken considerable talk to lead up to this; for the tone, even more than the words, indicated a large increase of intimacy. Verena was mindful of this when he spoke; and it frightened her a little, made her uneasy, which was one of the reasons why she got up from her chair and went to the window—an inconsequent movement, inasmuch as her wish was to impress upon him that it was impossible she should comply with his request. It would have served this end much better for her to sit, very firmly, in her place. He made her nervous and restless; she was beginning to perceive that he produced a peculiar effect upon her. Certainly, she had been out with him at home the very first time he called upon her; but it seemed to her to make an important difference that she herself should then have proposed the walk—simply because it was the easiest thing to do when a person came to see you in Monadnoc Place.

They had gone out that time because she wanted to, not because he did. And then it was one thing for her to stroll with him round Cambridge, where she knew every step and had the confidence and freedom which came from being on her own ground, and the pretext, which was perfectly natural, of wanting to show him the colleges, and quite another thing to go wandering with him through the streets of this great strange city, which, attractive, delightful as it was, had not the suitableness even of being his home, not his real one. He wanted to show her something, he wanted to show her everything; but she was not sure now—after an hour's talk—that she particularly wanted to see anything more that he could show her. He had shown her a great deal while he sat there, especially what balderdash he thought it —the whole idea of women's being equal to men. He seemed to have come only for that, for he was all the while revolving round it; she couldn't speak of anything but what he brought it back to the question of some new truth like that. He didn't say so in so many words; on the contrary, he was tremendously insinuating and satirical, and pretended to think she had proved all and a great deal more than she wanted to prove; but his exaggeration, and the way he rung all the changes on two or three of the points she had made at Mrs. Burrage's, were just the sign that he was a scoffer of scoffers. He wouldn't do anything but laugh; he seemed to think that he might laugh at her all day without her taking offense. Well, he might if it amused him; but she didn't see why she should ramble round New York with him to give him his opportunity.

She had told him, and she had told Olive, that she was determined to produce some effect on him; but now, suddenly, she felt differently about that—she ceased to care whether she produced any effect or not. She didn't see why she should take him so seriously, when he wouldn't take her so; that is, wouldn't take her ideas. She had guessed before that he didn't want to discuss them; this had been in her mind when she said to him at Cambridge that his interest in her was personal, not controversial. Then she had simply meant that, as an inquiring young Southerner, he had wanted to see what a bright New England girl was like; but since then it had become a little more clear to her—her short talk with Ransom at Mrs. Burrage's threw some light upon the question—what the personal interest of a young Southerner (however inquiring merely) might amount to. Did he too want to make love to her? This idea made Verena rather impatient, weary in advance. The thing she desired least in the world was to be put into the wrong with Olive; for she had certainly given her ground to believe (not only in their scene the night before, which was a simple repetition, but all along, from the very first), that she really had an interest which would transcend any attraction coming from such a source as that. If yesterday it seemed to her that she should like to struggle with Mr. Ransom, to refute and convince him, she had this morning gone into the parlor to receive him with the idea that, now they were alone together in a quiet, favorable place, he would perhaps take up the different points of her address one by one, as several gentlemen had done after hearing her on other occasions. There was nothing she liked so well as that, and Olive never had anything to say against it. But he hadn't taken up anything; he had simply laughed and chaffed, and unrolled a string of queer fancies about the delightful way women would fix things when, as she said in her address, they should get out of their box. He kept talking about the box; he seemed as if he wouldn't let go that simile. He said that he had come to look at her through the glass sides, and if he wasn't afraid of hurting her he would smash them in. He was determined to find the key that would open it, if he had to look for it all over the world; it was tantalizing only to be able to talk to her through the keyhole. If he didn't want to take up the subject, he at least wanted to take *her* up—to keep his hand upon her as long as he could. Verena had had no such sensation since the first day she went in to see Olive Chancellor, when she felt herself plucked from the earth and born aloft.

"It's the most lovely day, and I should like so much to show you New York, as you showed me your beautiful Harvard," Basil Ransom went on, pressing her to accede to his proposal. "You said that was the only thing you could do for me then, and so this is the only thing I can do for you here. It would be odious to see you go away, giving me nothing but this stiff little talk in a boardinghouse parlor."

"Mercy, if you call this stiff!" Verena exclaimed, laughing, while at that moment Olive passed out of the house and descended the steps before her eyes.

"My poor cousin's stiff; she won't turn her head a hair's breadth to look at us," said the young man. Olive's figure, as she went by, was, for Verena, full of a queer, touching, tragic expression, saying ever so many things, both familiar and strange; and Basil Ransom's companion privately remarked how little men knew about women, or indeed about what was really delicate, that he, without any cruel intention, should attach an idea of ridicule to such an incarnation of the pathetic, should speak rough, derisive words about it. Ransom, in truth, today, was not disposed to be very scrupulous, and he only wanted to get rid of Olive Chancellor, whose image, at last, decidedly bothered and bored him. He was glad to see her go out; but that was not sufficient, she would come back quick enough; the place itself contained her, expressed her. For today he wanted to take possession of Verena, to carry her to a distance, to reproduce a little the happy conditions they had enjoyed the day of his visit to Cambridge. And the fact that in the nature of things it could only be for today made his desire more keen, more full of purpose. He had thought over the whole question in the last forty-eight hours, and it was his belief that he saw things in their absolute reality. He took a greater interest in her than he had taken in any one yet, but he proposed, after today, not to let that accident make any difference. This was precisely what gave its high value to the present limited occasion. He was too shamefully poor, too shabbily and meagerly equipped, to have the right to talk of marriage to a girl in Verena's very peculiar position. He understood now how good that position was, from a worldly point of view; her address at Mrs. Burrage's gave him something definite to go upon, showed him what she could do, that people would flock in thousands to an exhibition so charming (and small blame to them); that she might easily have a big career, like that of a distinguished actress or singer, and that she would make money in quantities only slightly smaller than performers of that kind. Who wouldn't pay half a dollar for such an hour as he had passed at Mrs. Burrage's? The sort of thing she was able to do, to say, was an article for which there was more and more demand—fluent, pretty, third-rate palaver, conscious or unconscious perfected humbug; the stupid, gregarious, gullible public, the enlightened democracy of his native land, could swallow unlimited draughts of it. He was sure she could go, like that, for several years, with her portrait in the druggists' windows and her posters on the fences, and during that time would make a fortune sufficient to keep her in affluence forevermore. I shall perhaps expose our young man to the contempt of superior minds if I say that all this seemed to him an insuperable impediment to his making up to Verena. His scruples were doubtless begotten of a false pride, a sentiment in which there was a thread of moral tinsel, as there was in the Southern idea of chivalry; but he felt ashamed of his own poverty, the positive flatness of his situation, when he thought of the gilded nimbus that surrounded the protégée of Mrs. Burrage. This shame was possible to him even while he was conscious of what a mean business it was to practice upon human imbecility, how much better it was even to be seedy and obscure, discouraged about one's self. He had been born to the prospect of a fortune, and in spite of the years of misery that followed the war had never rid himself of the belief that a gentleman who desired to unite himself to a charming girl couldn't yet ask her to come and live with him in sordid conditions. On the other hand it was no possible basis of matrimony that Verena should continue for his advantage the exercise of her remunerative profession; if he should become her husband he should know a way to strike her dumb. In the midst of this an irrepressible desire urged him on to taste, for once, deeply, all that he was condemned to lose, or at any rate forbidden to attempt to gain. To spend a day with her and not to see her again—that presented itself to him at once as the least and the most that was possible. He did not need even to remind himself that young Mr. Burrage was able to offer her everything *he* lacked, including the most amiable adhesion to her views.

"It will be charming in the Park today. Why not take a stroll with me there as I did with you in the little park at Harvard?" he asked, when Olive had disappeared.

"Oh, I have seen it, very well, in every corner. A friend of mine kindly took me to drive there yesterday," Verena said.

"A friend?—do you mean Mr. Burrage?" And Ransom stood looking at her with his extraordinary eyes. "Of course, I haven't a vehicle to drive you in; but we can sit on a bench and talk." She didn't say it was Mr. Burrage, but she was unable to say it was not, and something in her face showed him that he had guessed. So he went on: "Is it only with him you can go out? Won't he like it, and may you only do what he likes? Mrs. Luna told me he wants to marry you, and I saw at his mother's how he stuck to you. If you are going to marry him, you can drive with him every day in the year, and that's just a reason for your giving me an hour or two now, before it becomes impossible." He didn't mind much what he said—it had been his plan not to mind much today—and so long as he made her do what he wanted he didn't care much how he did it. But he saw that his words brought the color to her face; she stared, surprised at his freedom and familiarity. He went on, dropping the hardness, the irony of which he was conscious, out of

his tone. "I know it's no business of mine whom you marry, or even whom you drive with, and I beg your pardon if I seem indiscreet and obtrusive; but I would give anything just to detach you a little from your ties, your belongings, and feel for an hour or two, as if—as if——" And he paused.

"As if what?" she asked, very seriously.

"As if there were no such person as Mr. Burrage—as Miss Chancellor—in the whole place." This had not been what he was going to say; he used different words.

"I don't know what you mean, why you speak of other persons. I can do as I like, perfectly. But I don't know why you should take so for granted that *that* would be it!" Verena spoke these words not out of coquetry, or to make him beg her more for a favor, but because she was thinking, and she wanted to gain a moment. His allusion to Henry Burrage touched her, his belief that she had been in the Park under circumstances more agreeable than those he proposed. They were not; somehow, she wanted him to know that. To wander there with a companion, slowly stopping, lounging, looking at the animals as she had seen the people do the day before; to sit down in some out-of-the-way part where there were distant views, which she had noticed from her high perch beside Henry Burrage—she had to look down so, it made her feel unduly fine: that was much more to her taste, much more her idea of true enjoyment. It came over her that Mr. Ransom had given up his work to come to her at such an hour; people of his kind, in the morning, were always getting their living, and it was only for Mr. Burrage that it didn't matter, inasmuch as he had no profession. Mr. Ransom simply wanted to give up his whole day. That pressed upon her; she was, as the most good-natured girl in the world, too entirely tender not to feel any sacrifice that was made for her; she had always done everything that people asked. Then, if Olive should make that strange arrangement for her to go to Mrs. Burrage's he would take it as a proof that there was something serious between her and the gentleman of the house, in spite of anything she might say to the contrary; moreover, if she should go she wouldn't be able to receive Mr. Ransom there. Olive would trust her not to, and she must certainly, in future, not disappoint Olive nor keep anything back from her, whatever she might have done in the past. Besides, she didn't want to do that; she thought it much better not. It was this idea of the episode which was possibly in store for her in New York, and from which her present companion would be so completely excluded, that worked upon her now with a rapid transition, urging her to grant him what he asked, so that in advance she should have made up for what she might not do for him later. But most of all she disliked his thinking she was engaged to some one. She didn't know, it is true, why she should mind it; and indeed, at this moment, our young lady's feelings were not in any way clear to her. She did not see what was the use of letting her acquaintance with Mr. Ransom become much closer (since his interest did really seem personal); and yet she presently asked him why he wanted her to go out with him, and whether there was anything particular he wanted to say to her (there was no one like Verena for making speeches apparently flirtatious, with the best faith and the most innocent intention in the world) ; as if that would not be precisely a reason to make it well she should get rid of him altogether.

"Of course I have something particular to say to you—I have a tremendous lot to say to you!" the young man exclaimed. "Far more than I can say in this stuck-up, confined room, which is public, too, so that anyone may come in from one moment to another. Besides," he added, sophistically, "it isn't proper for me to pay a visit of three hours."

Verena did not take up the sophistry, nor ask him whether it would be more proper for her to ramble about the city with him for an equal period; she only said, "Is it something that I shall care to hear, or that will do me any good?"

"Well, I hope it will do you good; but I don't suppose you will care much to hear it." Basil Ransom hesitated a moment, smiling at her; then he went on: "It's to tell you, once for all, how much I really do differ from you!" He said this at a venture, but it was a happy inspiration.

If it was only that, Verena thought she might go, for that was not personal. "Well, I'm glad you care so much," she answered, musingly. But she had another scruple still, and she expressed it in saying that she should like Olive very much to find her when she came in.

"That's all very well," Ransom returned; "but does she think that she only has a right to go out? Does she expect you to keep the house because she's abroad? If she stays out long enough, she will find you when she comes in."

"Her going out that way—it proves that she trusts me," Verena said, with a candor which alarmed her as soon as she had spoken.

Her alarm was just, for Basil Ransom instantly caught up her words, with a great mocking amazement. "Trusts you? and why shouldn't she trust you? Are you a little girl of ten and she your governess? Haven't you any liberty at all, and is she always watching you and holding you to an account? Have you such vagabond instincts that you are only thought safe when you are between four walls?" Ransom was going to speak, in the same tone, of her having felt it necessary to keep Olive in ignorance of his visit to Cambridge —a fact they had touched on, by implication, in their short talk at Mrs. Burrage's; but in a moment he saw that he had said enough. As for Verena, she had said more than she meant, and the simplest way to unsay it was to go and get her bonnet and jacket and let him take her where he liked. Five minutes later he was walking up and down the parlor, waiting while she prepared herself to go out.

They went up to the Central Park by the elevated railway, and Verena reflected, as they proceeded, that anyway Olive was probably disposing of her somehow at Mrs. Burrage's, and that therefore there wasn't much harm in her just taking this little run on her own responsibility, especially as she should only be out an hour—which would be just the duration of Olive's absence. The beauty of the "elevated" was that it took you up to the Park and brought you back in a few minutes, and you had all the rest of the hour to walk about and see the place. It was so pleasant now that one was glad to see it twice over. The long, narrow inclosure, across which the houses in the streets that border it look at each other with their glittering windows, bristled with the raw delicacy of April, and, in spite of its rockwork grottos and tunnels, its pavilions and statues, its too numerous paths and pavements, lakes too big for the landscape and bridges too big for the lakes, expressed all the fragrance and freshness of the most charming moment of the year. Once Verena was fairly launched the spirit of the day took possession of her; she was glad to have come, she forgot about Olive, enjoyed the sense of wandering in the great city with a remarkable young man who would take beautiful care of her, while no one else in the world knew where she was. It was very different from her drive yesterday with Mr. Burrage, but it was more free, more intense, more full of amusing incident and opportunity. She could stop and look at everything now, and indulge all her curiosities, even the most childish; she could feel as if she were out for the day, though she was not really—as she had not done since she was a little girl, when in the country, once or twice, when her father and mother had drifted into summer quarters, gone out of town like people of fashion, she had, with a chance companion, strayed far from home, spent hours in the woods and fields, looking for raspberries and playing she was a gypsy. Basil Ransom had begun with proposing, strenuously, that she should come somewhere and have luncheon; he had brought her out half an hour before that meal was served in West Tenth Street, and he maintained that he owed her the compensation of seeing that she was properly fed; he knew a very quiet, luxurious French restaurant, near the top of the Fifth Avenue: he didn't tell her that he knew it through having once lunched there in company with Mrs. Luna. Verena for the present declined his hospitality—said she was going to be out so short a time that it wasn't worth the trouble; she should not be hungry, luncheon to her was nothing, she would eat when she went home. When he pressed her she said she would see later, perhaps, if she should find she wanted something. She would have liked immensely to go with him to an eating-house, and yet, with this, she was afraid, just as she was rather afraid, at bottom, and in the intervals of her quick pulsations of amusement, of the whole expedition, not knowing why she had come, though it made her happy, and reflecting that there was really nothing Mr. Ransom could have to say to her that would concern her closely enough. He knew what he intended about her sharing the noonday repast with him somehow; it had been part of his plan that she should sit opposite him at a little table, taking her napkin out of its curious folds—sit there smiling back at him while he said to her certain things that hummed, like memories of tunes, in his fancy, and they waited till something extremely good, and a little vague, chosen out of a French *carte,* was brought them. That was not at all compatible with her going home at the end of half an hour, as she seemed to expect to. They visited the animals in the little zoological garden which forms one of the attractions of the Central Park; they observed the swans in the ornamental water, and they even considered the question of taking a boat for half an hour, Ransom saying that they needed this to make their visit complete. Verena replied that she didn't see why it should be complete, and after having threaded the devious ways of the Ramble, lost themselves in the Maze, and admired all the statues and busts of great men with which the grounds are decorated, they contented themselves with resting on a sequestered bench, where, however, there was a pretty glimpse of the distance and an occasional stroller creaked by on the asphalt walk.

They had had by this time a great deal of talk, none of which, nevertheless, had been serious to Verena's view. Mr. Ransom continued to joke about everything, including the emancipation of women; Verena, who had always lived with people who took the world very earnestly, had never encountered such a power of disparagement or heard so much sarcasm leveled at the institutions of her country and the tendencies of the age. At first she replied to him, contradicted, showed a high spirit of retort, turning his irreverence against himself; she was too quick and ingenious not to be able to think of something to oppose—talking in a fanciful strain—to almost everything he said. But little by little she grew weary and rather sad; brought up, as she had been, to admire new ideas, to criticize the social arrangements that one met almost everywhere, and to disapprove of a great many things, she had yet never dreamed of such a wholesale arrangement as Mr. Ransom's, so much bitterness as she saw lurking beneath his exaggerations, his misrepresentations. She knew he was an intense conservative, but she didn't know that being a conservative could make a person so aggressive and unmerciful. She thought conservatives were only smug and stubborn and self-complacent, satisfied with what actually existed; but Mr. Ransom didn't seem any more satisfied with what existed than with what she wanted to exist, and he was ready to say worse things about some of those whom she would have supposed to be on his own side than she thought it right to say about almost anyone. She ceased after a while to care to argue with him, and wondered what could have happened to him to make him so perverse. Probably something had gone wrong in his life—he had had some misfortune that colored his whole view of the world. He was a cynic; she had often heard about that state of mind, though she had never encountered it, for all the people she had seen only cared, if

possible, too much. Of Basil Ransom's personal history she knew only what Olive had told her, and that was but a general outline, which left plenty of room for private dramas, secret disappointments and sufferings. As she sat there beside him she thought of some of these things, asked herself whether they were what he was thinking of when he said, for instance, that he was sick of all the modern cant about freedom and had no sympathy with those who wanted an extension of it. What was needed for the good of the world was that people should make a better use of the liberty they possessed. Such declarations as this took Verena's breath away; she didn't suppose you could hear anyone say such a thing as that in the nineteenth century, even the least advanced. It was of a piece with his denouncing the spread of education; he thought the spread of education a gigantic farce—people stuffing their heads with a lot of empty catchwords that prevented them from doing their work quietly and honestly. You had a right to an education only if you had an intelligence, and if you looked at the matter with any desire to see things as they are you soon perceived that an intelligence was a very rare luxury, the attribute of one person in a hundred. He seemed to take a pretty low view of humanity, anyway. Verena hoped that something really bad had happened to him—not by way of gratifying any resentment he aroused in her nature, but to help herself to forgive him for so much contempt and brutality. She wanted to forgive him, for after they had sat on their bench half an hour and his jesting mood had abated a little, so that he talked with more consideration (as it seemed), and more sincerity, a strange feeling came over her, a perfect willingness not to keep insisting on her own side and a desire not to part from him with a mere accentuation of their differences. Strange I call the nature of her reflections, for they softly battled with each other as she listened, in the warm, still air, touched with the faraway hum of the immense city, to his deep, sweet, distinct voice, expressing monstrous opinions with exotic cadences and mild, familiar laughs, which, as he leaned toward her, almost tickled her cheek and ear. It seemed to her strangely harsh, almost cruel, to have brought her out only to say to her things which, after all, free as she was to contradict them and tolerant as she always tried to be, could only give her pain; yet there was a spell upon her as she listened; it was in her nature to be easily submissive, to like being overborne. She could be silent when people insisted, and silent without acrimony. Her whole relation to Olive was a kind of tacit, tender assent to passionate insistence, and if this had ended by being easy and agreeable to her (and indeed had never been anything else), it may be supposed that the struggle of yielding to a will which she felt to be stronger even than Olive's was not of long duration. Ransom's will had the effect of making her linger even while she knew the afternoon was going on, that Olive would have come back and found her still absent, and would have been submerged again in the bitter waves of anxiety. She saw her, in fact, as she must be at that moment, posted at the window of her room in Tenth Street, watching for some sign of her return, listening for her step on the staircase, her voice in the hall. Verena looked at this image as at a painted picture, perceived all it represented, every detail. If it didn't move her more, make her start to her feet, dart away from Basil Ransom and hurry back to her friend, this was because the very torment to which she was conscious of subjecting that friend made her say to herself that it must be the very last. This was the last time she could ever sit by Mr. Ransom and hear him express himself in a manner that interfered so with her life; the ordeal had been so personal and so complete that she forgot, for the moment, it was also the first time it had occurred. It might have been going on for months. She was perfectly aware that it could bring them to nothing, for one must lead one's own life; it was impossible to lead the life of another, especially when that other was so different, so arbitrary and unscrupulous.

"I presume you are the only person in this country who feels as you do," she observed at last.

"Not the only person who feels so, but very possibly the only person who thinks so. I have an idea that my convictions exist in a vague, unformulated state in the minds of a great many of my fellow-citizens. If I should succeed some day in giving them adequate expression I should simply put into shape the slumbering instincts of an important minority."

"I am glad you admit it's a minority!" Verena exclaimed. "That's fortunate for us poor creatures. And what do you call adequate expression? I presume you would like to be President of the United States?"

"And breathe forth my views in glowing messages to a palpitating Senate? That is exactly what I should like to be; you read my aspirations wonderfully well."

"Well, do you consider that you have advanced far in that direction, as yet?" Verena asked.

This question, with the tone in which it happened to be uttered, seemed to the young man to project rather an ironical light upon his present beggarly condition, so that for a moment he said nothing; a moment during which if his neighbor had glanced round at his face she would have seen it ornamented by an incipient blush. Her words had for him the effect of a sudden, though, on the part of a young woman who had of course every right to defend herself, a perfectly legitimate taunt. They appeared only to repeat in another form (so at least his exaggerated Southern pride, his hot sensibility, interpreted the matter), the idea that a gentleman so dreadfully backward in the path of fortune had no right to take up the time of a brilliant, successful girl, even for the purpose of satisfying himself that he renounced her. But the reminder only sharpened his wish to make her feel that if he had renounced, it was simply on account of that same ugly, accidental, outside backwardness; and if he had not, he went so far as to flatter himself, he might triumph over the whole accumulation of her prejudices—over all the bribes of her notoriety. The deepest feeling in Ransom's bosom in relation to her was the conviction that she was made for love, as he had said to himself while he listened to her at Mrs. Burrage's. She was profoundly unconscious of it, and another ideal, crude and thin and artificial, had interposed itself; but in the presence of a man she should really care for, this false, flimsy structure would rattle to her feet, and the emancipation of Olive Chancellor's sex (what sex was it, great heaven? he used profanely to ask himself), would be relegated to the land of vapors, of dead phrases. The reader may imagine whether such an impression as this made it any more agreeable to Basil to have to believe it would be indelicate in him to try to woo her. He would have resented immensely the imputation that he had done anything of that sort yet. "Ah, Miss Tarrant, my success in life is one thing—my ambition is another!" he exclaimed, presently, in answer to her inquiry. "Nothing is more possible than that I may be poor and unheard of all my days; and in that case no one but myself will know the visions of greatness I have stifled and buried."

"Why do you talk of being poor and unheard of? Aren't you getting on quite well in this city?"

This question of Verena's left him no time, or at least no coolness, to remember that to Mrs. Luna and to Olive he had put a fine face on his prospects, and that any impression the girl might have about them was but the natural echo of what these ladies believed. It had to his ear such a subtly mocking, defiant, unconsciously injurious quality, that the only answer he could make to it seemed to him for the moment to be an outstretched arm, which, passing round her waist, should draw her so close to him as to enable him to give her a concise account of his situation in the form of a deliberate kiss. If the moment I speak of had lasted a few seconds longer I know not what monstrous proceeding of this kind it would have been my difficult duty to describe; it was fortunately arrested by the arrival of a nursery-maid pushing a perambulator and accompanied by an infant who toddled in her wake. Both the nurse and her companion gazed fixedly, and it seemed to Ransom even sternly, at the striking couple on the bench; and meanwhile Verena, looking with a quickened eye at the children (she adored children) , went on—

"It sounds too flat for you to talk about your remaining unheard of. Of course you are ambitious; anyone can see that, to look at you. And once your ambition is excited in any particular direction, people had better look out. With your will!" she added, with a curious mocking candor.

"What do you know about my will?" he asked, laughing a little awkwardly, as if he had really attempted to kiss her —in the course of the second independent interview he had e er had with her—and been rebuffed.

"I know it's stronger than mine. It made me come out,

hen I thought I had much better not, and it keeps me sitting here long after I should have started for home."

"Give me the day, dear Miss Tarrant, give me the day," Basil Ransom murmured; and as she turned her

face upon him, moved by the expression of his voice, he added—"Come and dine with me, since you wouldn't lunch. Are you really not faint and weak?"

"I am faint and weak at all the horrible things you have said; I have lunched on abominations. And now you want me to dine with you? Thank you; I think you're cool!" Verena cried, with a laugh which her chronicler knows to have been expressive of some embarrassment, though Basil Ransom did not.

"You must remember that I have, on two different occasions, listened to you for an hour, in speechless, submissive attention, and that I shall probably do it a great many times more."

"Why should you ever listen to me again, when you loathe my ideas?"

"I don't listen to your ideas; I listen to your voice."

"Ah, I told Olive!" said Verena, quickly, as if his words had confirmed an old fear; which was general, however, and did not relate particularly to him.

Ransom still had an impression that he was not making love to her, especially when he could observe, with all the superiority of a man—"I wonder whether you have understood ten words I have said to you?"

"I should think you had made it clear enough—you had rubbed it in!"

"What have you understood, then?"

"Why, that you want to put us back further than we have been at any period."

"I have been joking; I have been piling it up," Ransom said, making that concession unexpectedly to the girl. Every now and then he had an air of relaxing himself, becoming absent, ceasing to care to discuss.

She was capable of noticing this, and in a moment she asked—"Why don't you write out your ideas?"

This touched again upon the matter of his failure; it was curious how she couldn't keep off it, hit it every time. "Do you mean for the public? I have written many things, but I can't get them printed."

"Then it would seem that there are not so many people —so many as you said just now—who agree with you."

"Well," said Basil Ransom, "editors are a mean, timorous lot, always saying they want something original, but deadly afraid of it when it comes."

"Is it for papers, magazines?" As it sank into Verena's mind more deeply that the contributions of this remarkable young man had been rejected—contributions in which, apparently, everything she held dear was riddled with scorn —she felt a strange pity and sadness, a sense of injustice. "I am very sorry you can't get published," she said, so simply that he looked up at her, from the figure he was scratching on the asphalt with his stick, to see whether such a tone as that, in relation to such a fact, were not "put on." But it was evidently genuine, and Verena added that she supposed getting published was very difficult always; she remembered, though she didn't mention, how little success her father had when he tried. She hoped Mr. Ransom would keep on; he would be sure to succeed at last. Then she continued, smiling, with more irony: "You may denounce me by name if you like. Only please don't say anything about Olive Chancellor."

"How little you understand what I want to achieve!" Basil Ransom exclaimed. "There you are—you women—all over; always meaning yourselves, something personal, and always thinking it is meant by others!"

"Yes, that's the charge they make," said Verena, gaily.

"I don't want to touch you, or Miss Chancellor, or Mrs. Farrinder, or Miss Birdseye, or the shade of Eliza P. Moseley, or any other gifted and celebrated being on earth—or in heaven."

"Oh, I suppose you want to destroy us by neglect, by silence!" Verena exclaimed, with the same brightness.

"No, I don't want to destroy you, any more than I want to save you. There has been far too much talk about you, and I want to leave you alone altogether. My interest is in my own sex; yours evidently can look after itself. That's what I want to save."

Verena saw that he was more serious now than he had been before, that he was not piling it up satirically, but saying really and a trifle wearily, as if suddenly he were tired of much talk, what he meant. "To save it from what?" she asked.

"From the most damnable feminization! I am so far from thinking, as you set forth the other night, that there is not enough woman in our general life, that it has long been pressed home to me that there is a great deal too much. The whole generation is womanized; the masculine tone is passing out of the world; it's a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age, an age of hollow phrases and false delicacy and exaggerated solicitudes and coddled sensibilities, which, if we don't soon look out, will usher in the reign of mediocrity, of the feeblest and flattest and the most pretentious that has ever been. The masculine character, the ability to dare and endure, to know and yet not fear reality, to look the world in the face and take it for what it is—a very queer and partly very base mixture—that is what I want to preserve, or rather, as I may say, to recover; and I must tell you that I don't in the least care what becomes of you ladies while I make the attempt!"

The poor fellow delivered himself of these narrow notions (the rejection of which by leading periodicals was certainly not a matter for surprise), with low, soft earnestness, bending toward her so as to give out his whole idea, yet apparently forgetting for the moment how offensive it must be to her now that it was articulated in that calm, severe way, in which no allowance was to be made for hyperbole. Verena

did not remind herself of this; she was too much impressed by his manner and by the novelty of a man taking that sort of religious tone about such a cause. It told her on the spot, from one minute to the other and once for all, that the man who could give her that impression would never come round. She felt cold, slightly sick, though she replied that now he summed up his creed in such a distinct, lucid way, it was much more comfortable—one knew with what one was dealing; a declaration much at variance with the fact, for Verena had never felt less gratified in her life. The ugliness of her companion's profession of faith made her shiver; it would have been difficult to her to imagine anything more crudely profane. She was determined, however, not to betray any shudder that could suggest weakness, and the best way she could think of to disguise her emotion was to remark in a tone which, although not assumed for that purpose, was really the most effective revenge, inasmuch as it always produced on Ransom's part (it was not peculiar, among women, to Verena), an angry helplessness —"Mr. Ransom, I assure you this is an age of conscience."

"That's a part of your cant. It's an age of unspeakable shams, as Carlyle says."

"Well," returned Verena, "it's all very comfortable for you to say that you wish to leave us alone. But you can't leave us alone. We are here, and we have got to be disposed of. You have got to put us somewhere. It's a remarkable social system that has no place for *us!"* the girl went on, with her most charming laugh.

"No place in public. My plan is to keep you at home and have a better time with you there than ever."

"I'm glad it's to be better; there's room for it. Woe to American womanhood when you start a movement for being more—what you like to be—at home!"

"Lord, how you're perverted; you, the very genius!" Basil Ransom murmured, looking at her with the kindest eyes.

She paid no attention to this, she went on, "And those who have got no home (there are millions, you know), what are you going to do with *them?* You must remember that women marry—are given in marriage—less and less; that isn't their career, as a matter of course, any more. You can't tell them to go and mind their husband and children, when they have no husband and children to mind."

"Oh," said Ransom, "that's a detail! And for myself, I confess, I have such a boundless appreciation of your sex in private life that I am perfectly ready to advocate a man's having a half a dozen wives."

"The civilization of the Turks, then, strikes you as the highest?"

"The Turks have a second-rate religion; they are fatalists, and that keeps them down. Besides, their women are not nearly so charming as ours—or as ours would be if this modern pestilence were eradicated. Think what a confession you make when you say that women are less and less sought in marriage; what a testimony that is to the pernicious effect on their manners, their person, their nature, of this fatuous agitation."

"That's very complimentary to me!" Verena broke in, lightly.

But Ransom was carried over her interruption by the. current of his argument. "There are a thousand ways in which any woman, all women, married or single, may find occupation. They may find it in making society agreeable."

"Agreeable to men, of course."

"To whom else, pray? Dear Miss Tarrant, what is most agreeable to women is to be agreeable to men! That is a truth as old as the human race, and don't let Olive Chancellor persuade you that she and Mrs. Farrinder have invented any that can take its place, or that is more profound, more durable."

Verena waived this point of the discussion; she only said: "Well, I am glad to hear you are prepared to see the place all choked up with old maids!"

"I don't object to the *old* old maids; they were delightful; they had always plenty to do, and didn't wander about the world crying out for a vocation. It is the new old maid that you have invented from whom I pray to be delivered." He didn't say he meant Olive Chancellor, but Verena looked at him as if she suspected him of doing so; and to put her off that scent he went on, taking up what she had said a moment before: "As for its not being complimentary to you, my remark about the effect on the women themselves of this pernicious craze, my dear Miss Tarrant, you may be quite at your ease. You stand apart, you are unique, extraordinary; you constitute a category by yourself. In you the elements have been mixed in a manner so felicitous that I regard you as quite incorruptible. I don't know where you come from nor how you come to be what you are, but you are outside and above all vulgarizing influences. Besides, you ought to know," the young man proceeded, in the same cool, mild, deliberate tone, as if he were demonstrating a mathematical solution, "you ought to know that your connection with all these rantings and ravings is the most unreal, accidental, illusory thing in the world. You think you care about them, but you don't at all. They were imposed upon you by circumstances, by unfortunate associations, and you accepted them as you would have accepted any other burden, on account of the sweetness of your nature. You always want to please someone, and now you go lecturing about the country, and trying to provoke demonstrations, in order to please Miss Chancellor, just as you did it before to please your father and mother. It isn't *you,* the least in the world, but an inflated little figure (very remarkable in its way too), whom you have invented and set on its feet, pulling strings, behind it, to make it move and speak, while you try to conceal and

efface yourself there. Ah, Miss Tarrant, if it's a question of pleasing, how much you might please someone else by tipping your preposterous puppet over and standing forth in your freedom as well as in your loveliness!"

While Basil Ransom spoke—and he had not spoken just that way yet—Verena sat there deeply attentive, with her eyes on the ground; but as soon as he ceased she sprang to her feet—something made her feel that their association had already lasted quite too long. She turned away from him as if she wished to leave him, and indeed were about to attempt to do so. She didn't desire to look at him now, or even to have much more conversation with him. "Something," I say, made her feel so, but it was partly his curious manner —so serene and explicit, as if he knew the whole thing to an absolute certainty—which partly scared her and partly made her feel angry. She began to move along the path to one of the gates, as if it were settled that they should immediately leave the place. He laid it all out so clearly; if he had had a revelation he couldn't speak otherwise. That description of herself as something different from what she was trying to be, the charge of want of reality, made her heart beat with pain; she was sure, at any rate, it was her real self that was there with him now, where she oughtn't to be. In a moment he was at her side again, going with her; and as they walked it came over her that some of the things he had said to her were far beyond what Olive could have imagined as the very worst possible. What would be her state now, poor forsaken friend, if some of them had been borne to her in the voices of the air? Verena had been affected by her companion's speech (his manner had changed so; it seemed to express something quite different), in a way that pushed her to throw up the discussion and determine that as soon as they should get out of the park she would go off by herself; but she still had her wits about her sufficiently to think it important she should give no sign of discomposure, of confessing that she was driven from the field. She appeared to herself to notice and reply to his extraordinary observations enough, without taking them up too much, when she said, tossing the words over her shoulder at Ransom, while she moved quickly: "I presume, from what you say, that you don't think I have much ability."

He hesitated before answering, while his long legs easily kept pace with her rapid step—her charming, touching, hurrying step, which expressed all the trepidation she was anxious to conceal. "Immense ability, but not in the line in which you most try to have it. In a very different line, Miss Tarrant! Ability is no word for it; it's genius!"

She felt his eyes on her face—ever so close and fixed there—after he had chosen to reply to her question that way. She was beginning to blush; if he had kept them longer, and on the part of anyone else, she would have called such a stare impertinent. Verena had been commended of old by Olive for her serenity "while exposed to the gaze of hundreds"; but a change had taken place, and she was now unable to endure the contemplation of an individual. She wished to detach him, to lead him off again into the general; and for this purpose, at the end of a moment, she made another inquiry: "I am to understand, then, as your last word that you regard us as quite inferior?"

"For public, civic uses, absolutely—perfectly weak and second-rate. I know nothing more indicative of the muddled sentiment of the time than that any number of men should be found to pretend that they regard you in any other light. But privately, personally, it's another affair. In the realm of family life and the domestic affections——"

At this Verena broke in, with a nervous laugh, "Don't say that; it's only a phrase!"

"Well, it's a better one than any of yours," said Basil Ransom, turning with her out of one of the smaller gates—the first they had come to. They emerged into the species of *plaza* formed by the numbered street which constitutes the southern extremity of the park and the termination of the Sixth Avenue. The glow of the splendid afternoon was over everything, and the day seemed to Ransom still in its youth. The bowers and boskages stretched behind them, the artificial lakes and cockneyfied landscapes, making all the region bright with the sense of air and space, and raw natural tints, and vegetation too diminutive to overshadow. The chocolate-colored houses, in tall, new rows, surveyed the expanse; the streetcars rattled in the foreground, changing horses while the horses steamed, and absorbing and emitting passengers; and the beer-saloons, with exposed shoulders and sides, which in New York do a good deal toward representing the picturesque, the "bit" appreciated by painters, announced themselves in signs of large lettering to the sky. Groups of the unemployed, the children of disappointment from beyond the seas, propped themselves against the low, sunny wall of the park; and on the other side the commercial vista of the Sixth Avenue stretched away with a remarkable absence of aerial perspective.

"I must go home; good-by," Verena said, abruptly, to her companion.

"Go home? You won't come and dine, then?"

Verena knew people who dined at midday and others who dined in the evening, and others still who never dined at all; but she knew no one who dined at half-past three. Ransom's attachment to this idea therefore struck her as queer and infelicitous, and she supposed it betrayed the habits of Mississippi. But that couldn't make it any more acceptable to her, in spite of his looking so disappointed—with his dimly-glowing eyes—that he was heedless for the moment that the main fact connected with her return to Tenth Street was that she wished to go alone.

"I must leave you, right away," she said. "Please don't ask me to stay; you wouldn't if you knew how

little I want to!" Her manner was different now, and her face as well, and though she smiled more than ever she had never seemed to him more serious.

"Alone, do you mean? Really I can't let you do that," Ransom replied, extremely shocked at this sacrifice being asked of him. "I have brought you this immense distance, I am responsible for you, and I must place you where I found you."

"Mr. Ransom, I must, I will!" she exclaimed, in a tone he had not yet heard her use; so that, a good deal amazed, puzzled and pained, he saw that he should make a mistake if he were to insist. He had known that their expedition must end in a separation which could not be sweet, but he had counted on making some of the terms of it himself. When he expressed the hope that she would at least allow him to put her into a car, she replied that she wished no car; she wanted to walk. This image of her "streaking off" by herself, as he figured it, did not mend the matter; but in the presence of her sudden nervous impatience he felt that here was a feminine mystery which must be allowed to take its course.

"It costs me more than you probably suspect, but I submit. Heaven guard you and bless you, Miss Tarrant!"

She turned her face away from him as if she were straining at a leash; then she rejoined, in the most unexpected manner: "I hope very much you *will* get printed."

"Get my articles published?" He stared, and broke out: "Oh, you delightful being!"

"Good-by," she repeated; and now she gave him her hand. As he held it a moment, and asked her if she were really leaving the city so soon that she mightn't see him again, she answered: "If I stay it will be at a place to which you mustn't come. They wouldn't let you see me."

He had not intended to put that question to her; he had set himself a limit. But the limit had suddenly moved on. "Do you mean at that house where I heard you speak?"

"I may go there for a few days."

"If it's forbidden to me to go and see you there, why did you send me a card?"

"Because I wanted to convert you then."

"And now you give me up?"

"No, no; I want you to remain as you are!"

She looked strange, with her more mechanical smile, as she said this, and he didn't know what idea was in her head. She had already left him, but he called after her, "If you do stay, I will come!" She neither turned nor made an answer, and all that was left to him was to watch her till she passed out of sight. Her back, with its charming young form, seemed to repeat that last puzzle, which was almost a challenge.

For this, however, Verena Tarrant had not meant it. She wanted, in spite of the greater delay and the way Olive would wonder, to walk home, because it gave her time to think, and think again, how glad she was (really, positively, *now),* that Mr. Ransom was on the wrong side. If he had been on the right——! She did not finish this proposition. She found Olive waiting for her in exactly the manner she had foreseen; she turned to her, as she came in, a face sufficiently terrible. Verena instantly explained herself, related exactly what she had been doing; then went on, without giving her friend time for question or comment: "And you—you paid your visit to Mrs. Burrage?"

"Yes, I went through that."

"And did she press the question of my coming there?"

"Very much indeed."

"And what did you say?"

"I said very little, but she gave me such assurances——"

"That you thought I ought to go?"

Olive was silent a moment; then she said: "She declares they are devoted to the cause, and that New York will be at your feet."

Verena took Miss Chancellor's shoulders in each of her hands, and gave her back, for an instant, her gaze, her silence. Then she broke out, with a kind of passion: "I don't care for her assurances—I don't care for New York! I won't go to them—I won't—do you understand?" Suddenly her voice changed, she passed her arms round her friend and buried her face in her neck. "Olive Chancellor, take me away, take me away!" she went on. In a moment Olive felt that she was sobbing and that the question was settled, the question she herself had debated in anguish a couple of hours before.

Book Third

35

The August night had gathered by the time Basil Ransom, having finished his supper, stepped out upon the piazza of the little hotel. It was a very little hotel and of a very slight and loose construction; the tread of a tall Mississippian made the staircase groan and the windows rattle in their frames. He was very hungry when he arrived, having not had a moment, in Boston, on his way through, to eat even the frugal morsel with which he was accustomed to sustain nature between a breakfast that consisted of a cup of coffee and a dinner that consisted of a cup of tea. He had had his cup of tea now, and very bad it was, brought him by a pale, round-backed young lady, with auburn ringlets, a fancy belt, and an expression of limited tolerance for a gentleman who could not choose quickly between fried fish, fried steak, and baked beans. The train for Marmion left Boston at four o'clock in the afternoon, and rambled fitfully toward the southern cape, while the shadows grew long in the stony pastures and the slanting light gilded the straggling, shabby woods, and painted the ponds and marshes with yellow gleams. The ripeness of summer lay upon the land, and yet there was nothing in the country Basil Ransom traversed that seemed susceptible of maturity; nothing but the apples in the little tough, dense orchards, which gave a suggestion of sour fruition here and there, and the tall, bright goldenrod at the bottom of the bare stone dykes. There were no fields of yellow grain; only here and there a crop of brown hay. But there was a kind of soft scrubbiness in the landscape, and a sweetness begotten of low horizons, of mild air, with a possibility of summer haze, of unregarded inlets where on August mornings the water must be brightly blue. Ransom had heard that the Cape was the Italy, so to speak, of Massachusetts; it had been described to him as the drowsy Cape, the languid Cape, the Cape not of storms, but of eternal peace. He knew that the Bostonians had been drawn thither, for the hot weeks, by its sedative influence, by the conviction that its toneless air would minister to perfect rest. In a career in which there was so much nervous excitement as in theirs they had no wish to be wound up when they went out of town; they were sufficiently wound up at all times by the sense of all their sex had been through. They wanted to live idly, to unbend and lie in hammocks, and also to keep out of the crowd, the rush of the watering-place. Ransom could see there was no crowd at Marmion, as soon as he got there, though indeed there was a rush, which directed itself to the only vehicle in waiting outside of the small, lonely, hut-like station, so distant from the village that, as far as one looked along the sandy, sketchy road which was supposed to lead to it, one saw only an empty land on either side. Six or eight men, in "dusters," carrying parcels and handbags, projected themselves upon the solitary, rickety carryall, so that Ransom could read his own fate, while the ruminating conductor of the vehicle, a lean, shambling citizen, with a long neck and a tuft on his chin, guessed that if he wanted to get to the hotel before dusk he would have to strike out. His valise was attached in a precarious manner to the rear of the carryall. "Well, I'll chance it," the driver remarked, sadly, when Ransom protested against its insecure position. He recognized the southern quality of that picturesque fatalism—judged that Miss Chancellor and Verena Tarrant must be pretty thoroughly relaxed if they had given themselves up to the genius of the place. This was what he hoped for and counted on, as he took his way, the sole pedestrian in the group that had quitted the train, in the wake of the over-laden carryall. It helped him to enjoy the first country walk he had had for many months, for more than months, for years, that the reflection was forced upon him as he went (the mild, vague scenery, just beginning to be dim with twilight, suggested it at every step), that the two young women who constituted, at Marmion, his whole prefigurement of a social circle, must, in such a locality as that, be taking a regular holiday. The sense of all the wrongs they had still to redress must be lighter there than it was in Boston; the ardent young man had, for the hour, an ingenuous hope that they had left their opinions in the city. He liked the very smell of the soil as he wandered along; cool, soft whiffs of evening met him at bends of the road which disclosed very little more —unless it might be a band of straight-stemmed woodland, keeping, a little, the red glow from the west, or (as he went further) an old house, shingled all over, gray and slightly collapsing, which looked down at him from a steep bank, at the top of wooden steps. He was already refreshed; he had tasted the breath of nature, measured his long grind in New York, without a vacation, with the repetition of the daily movement up and down the long, straight, maddening city, like a bucket in a well or a shuttle in a loom.

He lit his cigar in the office of the hotel—a small room on the right of the door, where a "register," meagerly inscribed, led a terribly public life on the little bare desk, and got its pages dog-eared before they were covered. Local worthies, of a vague identity, used to lounge there, as Ransom perceived the next day, by the hour. They tipped back their chairs against the wall, seldom spoke, and might have been supposed, with their converging vision, to be watching something out of the window, if there had been anything at Marmion to watch. Sometimes one of them got up and went to the desk, on which he leaned his elbows,

hunching a pair of sloping shoulders to an uncollared neck. For the fiftieth time he perused the flyblown page of the recording volume, where the names followed each other with such jumps of date. The others watched him while he did so—or contemplated in silence some "guest" of the hostelry, when such a personage entered the place with an air of appealing from the general irresponsibility of the establishment and found no one but the village-philosophers to address himself to. It was an establishment conducted by invisible, elusive agencies; they had a kind of stronghold in the dining room, which was kept locked at all but sacramental hours. There was a tradition that a "boy" exercised some tutelary function as regards the crumpled register; but when he was inquired about, it was usually elicited from the impartial circle in the office either that he was somewhere round or that he had gone a-fishing. Except the haughty waitress who has just been mentioned as giving Ransom his supper, and who only emerged at mealtimes from her mystic seclusion, this impalpable youth was the single person on the premises who represented domestic service. Anxious lady-boarders, wrapped in shawls, were seen waiting for him, as if he had been the doctor, on horsehair rockingchairs, in the little public parlor; others peered vaguely out of back doors and windows, thinking that if he were somewhere round they might see him. Sometimes people went to the door of the dining room and tried it, shaking it a little, timidly, to see if it would yield; then, finding it fast, came away, looking, if they had been observed, shy and snubbed, at their fellows. Some of them went so far as to say that they didn't think it was a very good hotel.

Ransom, however, didn't much care whether it were good or not; he hadn't come to Marmion for the love of the hotel. Now that he had got there, however, he didn't know exactly what to do; his course seemed rather less easy than it had done when, suddenly, the night before, tired, sick of the city air, and hungry for a holiday, he decided to take the next morning's train to Boston, and there take another to the shores of Buzzard's Bay. The hotel itself offered few resources; the inmates were not numerous; they moved about a little outside, on the small piazza and in the rough yard which interposed between the house and the road, and then they dropped off into the unmitigated dusk. This element, touched only in two or three places by a faraway dim glimmer, presented itself to Ransom as his sole entertainment. Though it was pervaded by that curious, pure, earthy smell which in New England, in summer, hangs in the nocturnal air, Ransom bethought himself that the place might be a little dull for persons who had not come to it, as he had, to take possession of Verena Tarrant. The unfriendly inn, which suggested dreadfully to Ransom (he despised the practice), an early bedtime, seemed to have no relation to anything, not even to itself; but a fellow-tenant of whom he made an inquiry told him the village was sprinkled round. Basil presently walked along the road in search of it, under the stars, smoking one of the good cigars which constituted his only tribute to luxury. He reflected that it would hardly do to begin his attack that night; he ought to give the Bostonians a certain amount of notice of his appearance on the scene. He thought it very possible, indeed, that they might be addicted to the vile habit of "retiring" with the cocks and hens. He was sure that was one of the things Olive Chancellor would do so long as he should stay —on purpose to spite him; she would make Verena Tarrant go to bed at unnatural hours, just to deprive him of his evenings. He walked some distance without encountering a creature or discerning an habitation; but he enjoyed the splendid starlight, the stillness, the shrill melancholy of the crickets, which seemed to make all the vague forms of the country pulsate around him; the whole impression was a bath of freshness after the long strain of the preceding two years, and his recent sweltering weeks in New York. At the end of ten minutes (his stroll had been slow), a figure drew near him, at first indistinct, but presently defining itself as that of a woman. She was walking apparently without purpose, like himself, or without other purpose than that of looking at the stars, which she paused for an instant, throwing back her head, to contemplate, as he drew nearer to her. In a moment he was very close; he saw her look at him, through the clear gloom, as they passed each other. She was small and slim; he made out her head and face, saw that her hair was cropped; had an impression of having seen her before. He noticed that as she went by she turned as well as himself, and that there was a sort of recognition in her movement. Then he felt sure that he had seen her elsewhere, and before she had added to the distance that separated them he stopped short, looking after her. She noticed his halt, paused equally, and for a moment they stood there face to face, at a certain interval, in the darkness.

"I beg your pardon—is it Doctor Prance?" he found himself demanding.

For a minute there was no answer; then came the voice of the little lady:

"Yes, sir; I am Doctor Prance. Any one sick at the hotel?"

"I hope not; I don't know," Ransom said, laughing.

Then he took a few steps, mentioned his name, recalled his having met her at Miss Birdseye's, ever so long before (nearly two years), and expressed the hope that she had not forgotten that.

She thought it over a little—she was evidently addicted neither to empty phrases nor to unconsidered assertions. "I presume you mean that night Miss Tarrant launched out so."

"That very night. We had a very interesting conversation."

"Well, I remember I lost a good deal," said Doctor Prance.

"Well, I don't know; I have an idea you made it up in other ways," Ransom returned, laughing still.

He saw her bright little eyes engage with his own. Staying, apparently, in the village, she had come

out, bareheaded, for an evening walk, and if it had been possible to imagine Doctor Prance bored and in want of recreation, the way she lingered there as if she were quite willing to have another talk might have suggested to Basil Ransom this condition. "Why, don't you consider her career very remarkable?"

"Oh yes; everything is remarkable nowadays; we live in an age of wonders!" the young man replied, much amused to find himself discussing the object of his adoration in this casual way, in the dark, on a lonely country-road, with a short-haired female physician. It was astonishing how quickly Doctor Prance and he had made friends again. "I suppose, by the way, you know Miss Tarrant and Miss Chancellor are staying down here?" he went on.

"Well, yes, I suppose I know it. I am visiting Miss Chancellor," the dry little woman added.

"Oh indeed? I am delighted to hear it!" Ransom exclaimed, feeling that he might have a friend in the camp. "Then you can inform me where those ladies have their house."

"Yes, I guess I can tell it in the dark. I will show you round now, if you like."

"I shall be glad to see it, though I am not sure I shall go in immediately. I must reconnoiter a little first. That makes me so very happy to have met you. I think it's very wonderful—your knowing me."

Doctor Prance did not repudiate this compliment, but she presently observed: "You didn't pass out of my mind entirely, because I have heard about you since, from Miss Birdseye."

"Ah yes, I saw her in the spring. I hope she is in health and happiness."

"She is always in happiness, but she can't be said to be in health. She is very weak; she is failing."

"I am very sorry for that."

"She is also visiting Miss Chancellor," Doctor Prance observed, after a pause which was an illustration of an appearance she had of thinking that certain things didn't at all imply some others.

"Why, my cousin has got all the distinguished women!" Basil Ransom exclaimed.

"Is Miss Chancellor your cousin? There isn't much family resemblance. Miss Birdseye came down for the benefit of the country air, and I came down to see if I could help her to get some good from it. She wouldn't much, if she were left to herself. Miss Birdseye has a very fine character, but she hasn't much idea of hygiene." Doctor Prance was evidently more and more disposed to be chatty. Ransom appreciated this fact, and said he hoped she, too, was getting some good from the country-air—he was afraid she was very much confined to her profession, in Boston; to which she replied—"Well, I was just taking a little exercise along the road. I presume you don't realize what it is to be one of four ladies grouped together in a small frame-house."

Ransom remembered how he had liked her before, and he felt that, as the phrase was, he was going to like her again. He wanted to express his good will to her, and would greatly have enjoyed being at liberty to offer her a cigar. He didn't know what to offer her or what to do, unless he should invite her to sit with him on a fence. He did realize perfectly what the situation in the small frame-house must be, and entered with instant sympathy into the feelings which had led Doctor Prance to detach herself from the circle and wander forth under the constellations, all of which he was sure she knew. He asked her permission to accompany her on her walk, but she said she was not going much further in that direction; she was going to turn round. He turned round with her, and they went back together to the village, in which he at last began to discover a certain consistency, signs of habitation, houses disposed with a rough resemblance to a plan. The road wandered among them with a kind of accommodating sinuosity, and there were even cross-streets, and an oil-lamp on a corner, and here and there the small sign of a closed shop, with an indistinctly countrified lettering. There were lights now in the windows of some of the houses, and Doctor Prance mentioned to her companion several of the inhabitants of the little town, who appeared all to rejoice in the prefix of captain. They were retired shipmasters; there was quite a little nest of these worthies, two or three of whom might be seen lingering in their dim doorways, as if they were conscious of a want of encouragement to sit up, and yet remembered the nights in faraway waters when they would not have thought of turning in at all. Marmion called itself a town, but it was a good deal shrunken since the decline in the shipbuilding interest; it turned out a good many vessels every year, in the palmy days, before the war. There were shipyards still, where you could almost pick up the old shavings, the old nails and rivets, but they were grass-grown now, and the water lapped them without anything to interfere. There was a kind of arm of the sea put in; it went up some way, it wasn't the real sea, but very quiet, like a river; that was more attractive to some. Doctor Prance didn't say the place was picturesque, or quaint, or weird; but he could see that was what she meant when she said it was mouldering away. Even under the mantle of night he himself gathered the impression that it had had a larger life, seen better days. Doctor Prance made no remark designed to elicit from him an account of his motives in coming to Marmion; she asked him neither when he had arrived nor how long he intended to stay. His allusion to his cousinship with Miss Chancellor might have served to her mind as a reason; yet, on the other hand, it would have been open to her to wonder why, if he had come to see the young ladies from Charles Street, he was not in more of a hurry to present himself. It was plain Doctor Prance didn't go into that kind of analysis. If Ransom had complained to her of a sore throat she would have inquired with precision about his symptoms; but she was incapable of asking him any question with a social bearing. Sociably enough, however, they continued to wander through the principal street of the little town, darkened in places by

immense old elms, which made a blackness overhead. There was a salt smell in the air, as if they were nearer the water; Doctor Prance said that Olive's house was at the other end.

"I shall take it as a kindness if, for this evening, you don't mention that you have happened to meet me," Ransom remarked, after a little. He had changed his mind about giving notice.

"Well, I wouldn't," his companion replied; as if she didn't need any caution in regard to making vain statements.

"I want to keep my arrival a little surprise for tomorrow. It will be a great pleasure to me to see Miss Birdseye," he went on, rather hypocritically, as if that at bottom had been to his mind the main attraction of Marmion.

Doctor Prance did not reveal her private comment, whatever it was, on this intimation; she only said, after some hesitation—"Well, I presume the old lady will take quite an interest in your being here."

"I have no doubt she is capable even of that degree of philanthropy."

"Well, she has charity for all, but she does—even she—prefer her own side. She regards you as quite an acquisition."

Ransom could not but feel flattered at the idea that he had been a subject of conversation—as this implied—in the little circle at Miss Chancellor's; but he was at a loss, for the moment, to perceive what he had done up to this time to gratify the senior member of the group. "I hope she will find me an acquisition after I have been here a few days," he said, laughing.

"Well, she thinks you are one of the most important converts yet," Doctor Prance replied, in a colorless way, as if she would not have pretended to explain why.

"A convert—me? Do you mean of Miss Tarrant's?" It had come over him that Miss Birdseye, in fact, when he was parting with her after their meeting in Boston, had assented to his request for secrecy (which at first had struck her as somewhat unholy), on the ground that Verena would bring him into the fold. He wondered whether that young lady had been telling her old friend that she had succeeded with him. He thought this improbable; but it didn't matter, and he said, gaily, "Well, I can easily let her suppose so!"

It was evident that it would be no easier for Doctor Prance to subscribe to a deception than it had been for her venerable patient; but she went so far as to reply, "Well, I hope you won't let her suppose you are where you were that time I conversed with you. I could see where you were then!"

"It was in about the same place you were, wasn't it?"

"Well," said Doctor Prance, with a small sigh, "I am afraid I have moved back, if anything!" Her sigh told him a good deal; it seemed a thin, self-controlled protest against the tone of Miss Chancellor's interior, of which it was her present fortune to form a part: and the way she hovered round, indistinct in the gloom, as if she were rather loath to resume her place there, completed his impression that the little doctress had a line of her own.

"That, at least, must distress Miss Birdseye," he said, reproachfully.

"Not much, because I am not of importance. They think women the equals of men; but they are a great deal more pleased when a man joins than when a woman does."

Ransom complimented Doctor Prance on the lucidity of her mind, and then he said: "Is Miss Birdseye really sick? Is her condition very precarious?"

"Well, she is very old, and very—very gentle," Doctor Prance answered, hesitating a moment for her adjective. "Under those circumstances a person may flicker out."

"We must trim the lamp," said Ransom; "I will take my turn, with pleasure, in watching the sacred flame."

"It will be a pity if she doesn't live to hear Miss Tarrant's great effort," his companion went on.

"Miss Tarrant's? What's that?"

"Well, it's the principal interest, in there." And Doctor Prance now vaguely indicated, with a movement of her head, a small white house, much detached from its neighbors, which stood on their left, with its back to the water, at a little distance from the road. It exhibited more signs of animation than any of its fellows; several windows, notably those of the ground floor, were open to the warm evening, and a large shaft of light was projected upon the grassy wayside in front of it. Ransom, in his determination to be discreet, checked the advance of his companion, who added presently, with a short, suppressed laugh —"You can see it is, from that!" He listened, to ascertain what she meant, and after an instant a sound came to his ear—a sound he knew already well, which carried the accents of Verena Tarrant, in ample periods and cadences, out into the stillness of the August night.

"Murder, what a lovely voice!" he exclaimed, involuntarily.

Doctor Prance's eye gleamed toward him a moment, and she observed, humorously (she was relaxing immensely), "Perhaps Miss Birdseye is right!" Then, as he made no rejoinder, only listening to the vocal inflections that floated out of the house, she went on—"She's practicing her speech."

"Her speech? Is she going to deliver one here?"

"No, as soon as they go back to town—at the Music Hall."

Ransom's attention was now transferred to his companion. "Is that why you call it her great effort?"

"Well, so they think it, I believe. She practices that way every night; she reads portions of it aloud to

Miss Chancellor and Miss Birdseye."

"And that's the time you choose for your walk?" Ransom said, smiling.

"Well, it's the time my old lady has least need of me; she's too absorbed."

Doctor Prance dealt in facts; Ransom had already discovered that; and some of her facts were very interesting.

"The Music Hall—isn't that your great building?" he asked.

"Well, it's the biggest we've got; it's pretty big, but it isn't so big as Miss Chancellor's ideas," added Doctor Prance. "She has taken it to bring out Miss Tarrant before the general public—she has never appeared that way in Boston—on a great scale. She expects her to make a big sensation. It will be a great night, and they are preparing for it. They consider it her real beginning."

"And this is the preparation?" Basil Ransom said.

"Yes; as I say, it's their principal interest."

Ransom listened, and while he listened he meditated. He had thought it possible Verena's principles might have been shaken by the profession of faith to which he treated her in New York; but this hardly looked like it. For some moments Doctor Prance and he stood together in silence.

"You don't hear the words," the doctor remarked, with a smile which, in the dark, looked Mephistophelean.

"Oh, I know the words!" the young man exclaimed, with rather a groan, as he offered her his hand for good night.

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A certain prudence had determined him to put off his visit till the morning; he thought it more probable that at that time he should be able to see Verena alone, whereas in the evening the two young women would be sure to be sitting together. When the morrow dawned, however, Basil Ransom felt none of the trepidation of the procrastinator; he knew nothing of the reception that awaited him, but he took his way to the cottage designated to him overnight by Doctor Prance, with the step of a man much more conscious of his own purpose than of possible obstacles. He made the reflection, as he went, that to see a place for the first time at night is like reading a foreign author in a translation. At the present hour—it was getting toward eleven o'clock—he felt that he was dealing with the original. The little straggling, loosely-clustered town lay along the edge of a blue inlet, on the other side of which was a low, wooded shore, with a gleam of white sand where it touched the water. The narrow bay carried the vision outward to a picture that seemed at once bright and dim—a shining, slumbering summer-sea, and a far-off, circling line of coast, which, under the August sun, was hazy and delicate. Ransom regarded the place as a town because Doctor Prance had called it one; but it was a town where you smelt the breath of the hay in the streets and you might gather blackberries in the principal square. The houses looked at each other across the grass—low, rusty, crooked, distended houses, with dry, cracked faces and the dim eyes of small-paned, stiffly-sliding windows. Their little dooryards bristled with rank, old-fashioned flowers, mostly yellow; and on the quarter that stood back from the sea the fields sloped upward, and the woods in which they presently lost themselves looked down over the roofs. Bolts and bars were not a part of the domestic machinery of Marmion, and the responsive menial, receiving the visitor on the threshold, was a creature rather desired than definitely possessed; so that Basil Ransom found Miss Chancellor's house-door gaping wide (as he had seen it the night before), and destitute even of a knocker or a bell-handle. From where he stood in the porch he could see the whole of the little sitting room on the left of the hall —see that it stretched straight through to the back windows; that it was garnished with photographs of foreign works of art, pinned upon the walls, and enriched with a piano and other little extemporized embellishments, such as ingenious women lavish upon the houses they hire for a few weeks. Verena told him afterwards that Olive had taken her cottage furnished, but that the paucity of chairs and tables and bedsteads was such that their little party used almost to sit down, to lie down, in turn. On the other hand they had all George Eliot's writings, and two photographs of the Sistine Madonna. Ransom rapped with his stick on the lintel of the door, but no one came to receive him; so he made his way into the parlor, where he observed that his cousin Olive had as many German books as ever lying about. He dipped into this literature, momentarily, according to his wont, and then remembered that this was not what he had come for and that as he waited at the door he had seen, through another door, opening at the opposite end of the hall, signs of a small veranda attached to the other face of the house. Thinking the ladies might be assembled there in the shade, he pushed aside the muslin curtain of the back window, and saw that the advantages of Miss Chancellor's summer residence were in this quarter. There was a veranda, in fact, to which a wide, horizontal trellis, covered with an ancient vine, formed a kind of extension. Beyond the trellis was a small, lonely garden; beyond the garden was a large, vague, woody space, where a few piles of old timber were disposed, and which he afterwards learned to be a relic of the shipbuilding era described to him by Doctor Prance; and still beyond this again was the charming lake-like estuary he had already admired. His eyes did not rest upon the distance; they were attracted by a figure seated under the trellis, where the checkers of sun, in the interstices of the vine-leaves, fell upon a bright-colored rug spread out on the ground. The floor of the roughly-constructed veranda was so low that there was virtually no difference in the level. It took Ransom only a moment to recognize Miss Birdseye, though her back was turned to the house. She was alone; she sat there motionless (she had a newspaper in her lap, but her attitude was not that of a reader), looking at the shimmering bay. She might be asleep; that was why Ransom moderated the process of his long legs as he came round through the house to join her. This precaution represented his only scruple. He stepped across the veranda and stood close to her, but she did not appear to notice him. Visibly, she was dozing, or presumably, rather, for her head was enveloped in an old faded straw hat, which concealed the upper part of her face. There were two or three other chairs near her, and a table on which were half a dozen books and periodicals, together with a glass containing a colorless liquid, on the top of which a spoon was laid. Ransom desired only to respect her repose, so he sat down in one of the chairs and waited till she should become aware of his presence. He thought Miss Chancellor's back garden a delightful spot, and his jaded senses tasted the breeze—the idle, wandering summer wind—that stirred the vine-leaves over his head. The hazy shores on the other side of the water, which had tints more delicate than the street-vistas of New

York (they seemed powdered with silver, a sort of midsummer light), suggested to him a land of dreams, a country in a picture. Basil Ransom had seen very few pictures, there were none in Mississippi; but he had a vision at times of something that would be more refined than the real world, and the situation in which he now found himself pleased him almost as much as if it had been a striking work of art. He was unable to see, as I have said, whether Miss Birdseye were taking in the prospect through open or only, imagination aiding (she had plenty of that), through closed, tired, dazzled eyes. She appeared to him, as the minutes elapsed and he sat beside her, the incarnation of well-earned rest, of patient, submissive superannuation. At the end of her long day's work she might have been placed there to enjoy this dim prevision of the peaceful river, the gleaming shores, of the paradise her unselfish life had certainly qualified her to enter, and which, apparently, would so soon be opened to her. After a while she said, placidly, without turning:

"I suppose it's about time I should take my remedy again. It does seem as if she had found the right thing; don't you think so?"

"Do you mean the contents of that tumbler? I shall be delighted to give it to you, and you must tell me how much you take." And Basil Ransom, getting up, possessed himself of the glass on the table.

At the sound of his voice Miss Birdseye pushed back her straw hat by a movement that was familiar to her, and twisting about her muffled figure a little (even in August she felt the cold, and had to be much covered up to sit out), directed at him a speculative, unastonished gaze.

"One spoonful—two?" Ransom asked, stirring the dose and smiling.

"Well, I guess I'll take two this time."

"Certainly, Doctor Prance couldn't help finding the right thing," Ransom said, as he administered the medicine; while the movement with which she extended her face to take it made her seem doubly childlike.

He put down the glass, and she relapsed into her position; she seemed to be considering. "It's homoeopathic," she remarked, in a moment.

"Oh, I have no doubt of that; I presume you wouldn't take anything else."

"Well, it's generally admitted now to be the true system."

Ransom moved closer to her, placed himself where she could see him better. "It's a great thing to have the true system," he said, bending toward her in a friendly way; "I'm sure you have it in everything." He was not often hypocritical; but when he was he went all lengths.

"Well, I don't know that any one has a right to say that. I thought you were Verena," she added in a moment, taking him in again with her mild, deliberate vision.

"I have been waiting for you to recognize me; of course you didn't know I was here—I only arrived last night."

"Well, I'm glad you have come to see Olive now."

"You remember that I wouldn't do that when I met you last?"

"You asked me not to mention to her that I had met you; that's what I principally recall."

"And don't you remember what I told you I wanted to do? I wanted to go out to Cambridge and see Miss Tarrant. Thanks to the information that you were so good as to give me, I was able to do so."

"Yes, she gave me quite a little description of your visit," said Miss Birdseye, with a smile and a vague sound in her throat—a sort of pensive, private reference to the idea of laughter—of which Ransom never learned the exact significance, though he retained for a long time afterwards a kindly memory of the old lady's manner at the moment.

"I don't know how much she enjoyed it, but it was an immense pleasure to me; so great a one that, as you see, I have come to call upon her again."

"Then, I presume, she *has* shaken you?"

"She has shaken me tremendously!" said Ransom, laughing.

"Well, you'll be a great addition," Miss Birdseye returned. "And this time your visit is also for Miss Chancellor?"

"That depends on whether she will receive me."

"Well, if she knows you are shaken, that will go a great way," said Miss Birdseye, a little musingly, as if even to her unsophisticated mind it had been manifested that one's relations with Miss Chancellor might be ticklish. "But she can't receive you now—can she?—because she's out. She has gone to the post office for the Boston letters, and they get so many every day that she had to take Verena with her to help her carry them home. One of them wanted to stay with me, because Doctor Prance has gone fishing, but I said I presumed I could be left alone for about seven minutes. I know how they love to be together; it seems as if one *couldn't* go out without the other. That's what they came down here for, because it's quiet, and it didn't look as if there was anyone else they would be much drawn to. So it would be a pity for me to come down after them just to spoil it!"

"I am afraid I shall spoil it, Miss Birdseye."

"Oh, well, a gentleman," murmured the ancient woman.

"Yes, what can you expect of a gentleman? I certainly shall spoil it if I can."

"You had better go fishing with Doctor Prance," said Miss Birdseye, with a serenity which showed that she was far from measuring the sinister quality of the announcement he had just made.

"I shan't object to that at all. The days here must be very long—very full of hours. Have you got the doctor with you?" Ransom inquired, as if he knew nothing at all about her.

"Yes, Miss Chancellor invited us both; she is very thoughtful. She is not merely a theoretic philanthropist—she goes into details," said Miss Birdseye, presenting her large person, in her chair, as if she herself were only an item. "It seems as if we were not so much wanted in Boston, just in August."

"And here you sit and enjoy the breeze, and admire the view," the young man remarked, wondering when the two messengers, whose seven minutes must long since have expired, would return from the post office.

"Yes, I enjoy everything in this little old-world place; I didn't suppose I should be satisfied to be so passive. It's a great contrast to my former exertions. But somehow it doesn't seem as if there were any trouble or any wrong round here; and if there should be, there are Miss Chancellor and Miss Tarrant to look after it. They seem to think I had better fold my hands. Besides, when helpful, generous minds begin to flock in from *your* part of the country," Miss Birdseye continued, looking at him from under the distorted and discolored canopy of her hat with a benignity which completed the idea in any cheerful sense he chose.

He felt by this time that he was committed to rather a dishonest part; he was pledged not to give a shock to her optimism. This might cost him, in the coming days, a good deal of dissimulation, but he was now saved from any further expenditure of ingenuity by certain warning sounds which admonished him that he must keep his wits about him for a purpose more urgent. There were voices in the hall of the house, voices he knew, which came nearer, quickly; so that before he had time to rise one of the speakers had come out with the exclamation—"Dear Miss Birdseye, here are seven letters for you!" The words fell to the ground, indeed, before they were fairly spoken, and when Ransom got up, turning, he saw Olive Chancellor standing there, with the parcel from the post office in her hand. She stared at him in sudden horror; for the moment her self-possession completely deserted her. There was so little of any greeting in her face save the greeting of dismay, that he felt there was nothing for him to say to her, nothing that could mitigate the odious fact of his being there. He could only let her take it in, let her divine that, this time, he was not to be got rid off. In an instant—to ease off the situation —he held out his hand for Miss Birdseye's letters, and it was a proof of Olive's having turned rather faint and weak that she gave them up to him. He delivered the packet to the old lady, and now Verena had appeared in the doorway of the house. As soon as she saw him, she blushed crimson; but she did not, like Olive, stand voiceless.

"Why, Mr. Ransom," she cried out, "where in the world were *you* washed ashore?" Miss Birdseye, meanwhile, taking her letters, had no appearance of observing that the encounter between Olive and her visitor was a kind of concussion.

It was Verena who eased off the situation; her gay challenge rose to her lips as promptly as if she had had no cause for embarrassment. She was not confused even when she blushed, and her alertness may perhaps be explained by the habit of public speaking. Ransom smiled at her while she came forward, but he spoke first to Olive, who had already turned her eyes away from him and gazed at the blue sea-view as if she were wondering what was going to happen to her at last.

"Of course you are very much surprised to see me; but I hope to be able to induce you to regard me not absolutely in the light of an intruder. I found your door open, and I walked in, and Miss Birdseye seemed to think I might stay. Miss Birdseye, I put myself under your protection; I invoke you; I appeal to you," the young man went on. "Adopt me, answer for me, cover me with the mantle of your charity!"

Miss Birdseye looked up from her letters, as if at first she had only faintly heard his appeal. She turned her eyes from Olive to Verena; then she said, "Doesn't it seem as if we had room for all? When I remember what I have seen in the South, Mr. Ransom's being here strikes me as a great triumph."

Olive evidently failed to understand, and Verena broke in with eagerness, "It was by my letter, of course, that you knew we were here. The one I wrote just before we came, Olive," she went on. "Don't you remember I showed it to you?"

At the mention of this act of submission on her friend's part Olive started, flashing her a strange look; then she said to Basil that she didn't see why he should explain so much about his coming; everyone had a right to come. It was a very charming place; it ought to do anyone good. "But it will have one defect for you," she added; "three-quarters of the summer residents are women!"

This attempted pleasantry on Miss Chancellor's part, so unexpected, so incongruous, uttered with white lips and cold eyes, struck Ransom to that degree by its oddity that he could not resist exchanging a glance of wonder with Verena, who, if she had had the opportunity, could probably have explained to him the phenomenon. Olive had recovered herself, reminded herself that she was safe, that her companion in New York had repudiated, denounced her pursuer; and, as a proof to her own sense of her security, as well as a touching mark to Verena that now, after what had passed, she had no fear, she felt that a certain light mockery would be effective.

"Ah, Miss Olive, don't pretend to think I love your sex so little, when you know that what you really

object to in me is that I love it too much!" Ransom was not brazen, he was not impudent, he was really a very modest man; but he was aware that whatever he said or did he was condemned to seem impudent now, and he argued within himself that if he was to have the dishonor of being thought brazen he might as well have the comfort. He didn't care a straw, in truth, how he was judged or how he might offend; he had a purpose which swallowed up such inanities as that, and he was so full of it that it kept him firm, balanced him, gave him assurance that might easily have been confounded with a cold detachment. "This place will do me good," he pursued; "I haven't had a holiday for more than two years, I couldn't have gone another day; I was finished. I would have written to you beforehand that I was coming, but I only started at a few hours' notice. It occurred to me that this would be just what I wanted; I remembered what Miss Tarrant had said in her note, that it was a place where people could lie on the ground and wear their old clothes. I delight to lie on the ground, and all my clothes are old. I hope to be able to stay three or four weeks."

Olive listened till he had done speaking; she stood a single moment longer, and then, without a word, a glance, she rushed into the house. Ransom saw that Miss Birdseye was immersed in her letters; so he went straight to Verena and stood before her, looking far into her eyes. He was not smiling now, as he had been in speaking to Olive. "Will you come somewhere apart, where I can speak to you alone?"

"Why have you done this? It was not right in you to come!" Verena looked still as if she were blushing, but Ransom perceived he must allow for her having been delicately scorched by the sun.

"I have come because it is necessary—because I have something very important to say to you. A great number of things."

"The same things you said in New York? I don't want to hear them again—they were horrible!"

"No, not the same—different ones. I want you to come out with me, away from here."

"You always want me to come out! We can't go out here; we *are* out, as much as we can be!" Verena laughed. She tried to turn it off—feeling that something really impended.

"Come down into the garden, and out beyond there—to the water, where we can speak. It's what I have come for; it was not for what I told Miss Olive!"

He had lowered his voice, as if Miss Olive might still hear them, and there was something strangely grave—altogether solemn, indeed—in its tone. Verena looked around her, at the splendid summer day, at the much-swathed, formless figure of Miss Birdseye, holding her letter inside her hat. "Mr. Ransom!" she articulated then, simply; and as her eyes met his again they showed him a couple of tears.

"It's not to make you suffer, I honestly believe. I don't want to say anything that will hurt you. How can I possibly hurt you, when I feel to you as I do?" he went on, with suppressed force.

She said no more, but all her face entreated him to let her off, to spare her; and as this look deepened, a quick sense of elation and success began to throb in his heart, for it told him exactly what he wanted to know. It told him that she was afraid of him, that she had ceased to trust herself, that the way he had read her nature was the right way (she was tremendously open to attack, she was meant for love, she was meant for him), and that his arriving at the point at which he wished to arrive was only a question of time. This happy consciousness made him extraordinarily tender to her; he couldn't put enough reassurance into his smile, his low murmur, as he said: "Only give me ten minutes; don't receive me by turning me away. It's my holiday—my poor little holiday; don't spoil it."

Three minutes later Miss Birdseye, looking up from her letter, saw them move together through the bristling garden and traverse a gap in the old fence which enclosed the further side of it. They passed into the ancient shipyard which lay beyond, and which was now a mere vague, grass-grown approach to the waterside, bestrewn with a few remnants of supererogatory timber. She saw them stroll forward to the edge of the bay and stand there, taking the soft breeze in their faces. She watched them a little, and it warmed her heart to see the stiff-necked young Southerner led captive by a daughter of New England trained in the right school, who would impose her opinions in their integrity. Considering how prejudiced he must have been he was certainly behaving very well; even at that distance Miss Birdseye dimly made out that there was something positively humble in the way he invited Verena Tarrant to seat herself on a low pile of weather-blackened planks, which constituted the principal furniture of the place, and something, perhaps, just a trifle too expressive of righteous triumph in the manner in which the girl put the suggestion by and stood where she liked, a little proudly, turning a good deal away from him. Miss Birdseye could see as much as this, but she couldn't hear, so that she didn't know what it was that made Verena turn suddenly back to him, at something he said. If she had known, perhaps his observation would have struck her as less singular—under the circumstances in which these two young persons met—than it may appear to the reader.

"They have accepted one of my articles; I think it's the best." These were the first words that passed Basil Ransom's lips after the pair had withdrawn as far as it was possible to withdraw (in that direction) from the house.

"Oh, is it printed—when does it appear?" Verena asked that question instantly; it sprang from her lips in a manner that completely belied the air of keeping herself at a distance from him which she had worn a few moments before.

He didn't tell her again this time, as he had told her when, on the occasion of their walk together in New York, she expressed an inconsequent hope that his fortune as a rejected contributor would take a turn —he didn't remark to her once more that she was a delightful being; he only went on (as if her revulsion were a matter of course), to explain everything he could, so that she might as soon as possible know him better and see how completely she could trust him. "That was, at bottom, the reason I came here. The essay in question is the most important thing I have done in the way of a literary attempt, and I determined to give up the game or to persist, according as I should be able to bring it to the light or not. The other day I got a letter from the editor of the 'Rational Review,' telling me that he should be very happy to print it, that he thought it very remarkable, and that he should be glad to hear from me again. He shall hear from me again—he needn't be afraid! It contained a good many of the opinions I have expressed to you, and a good many more besides. I really believe it will attract some attention. At any rate, the simple fact that it is to be published makes an era in my life. This will seem pitiful to you, no doubt, who publish yourself, have been before the world these several years, and are flushed with every kind of triumph; but to me it's simply a tremendous affair. It makes me believe I may do something; it has changed the whole way I look at my future. I have been building castles in the air, and I have put you in the biggest and fairest of them. That's a great change, and, as I say, it's really why I came on."

Verena lost not a word of this gentle, conciliatory, explicit statement; it was full of surprises for her, and as soon as Ransom had stopped speaking she inquired: "Why, didn't you feel satisfied about your future before?"

Her tone made him feel how little she had suspected he could have the weakness of a discouragement, how little of a question it must have seemed to her that he would one day triumph on his own erratic line. It was the sweetest tribute he had yet received to the idea that he might have ability; the letter of the editor of the "Rational Review" was nothing to it. "No, I felt very blue; it didn't seem to me at all clear that there was a place for me in the world."

"Gracious!" said Verena Tarrant.

A quarter of an hour later Miss Birdseye, who had returned to her letters (she had a correspondent at Framing-ham who usually wrote fifteen pages), became aware that Verena, who was now alone, was re-entering the house. She stopped her on her way, and said she hoped she hadn't pushed Mr. Ransom overboard.

"Oh no; he has gone off—round the other way."

"Well, I hope he is going to speak for us soon."

Verena hesitated a moment. "He speaks with the pen. He has written a very fine article—for the 'Rational Review.' "

Miss Birdseye gazed at her young friend complacently; the sheets of her interminable letter fluttered in the breeze. "Well, it's delightful to see the way it goes on, isn't it?"

Verena scarcely knew what to say; then, remembering that Doctor Prance had told her that they might lose their dear old companion any day, and confronting it with something Basil Ransom had just said—that the "Rational Review" was a quarterly and the editor had notified him that his article would appear only in the number after the next —she reflected that perhaps Miss Birdseye wouldn't be there, so many months later, to see how it was her supposed consort had spoken. She might, therefore, be left to believe what she liked to believe, without fear of a day of reckoning. Verena committed herself to nothing more confirmatory than a kiss, however, which the old lady's displaced headgear enabled her to imprint upon her forehead and which caused Miss Birdseye to exclaim, "Why, Verena Tarrant, how cold your lips are!" It was not surprising to Verena to hear that her lips were cold; a mortal chill had crept over her, for she knew that this time she should have a tremendous scene with Olive.

She found her in her room, to which she had fled on quitting Mr. Ransom's presence; she sat in the window, having evidently sunk into a chair the moment she came in, a position from which she must have seen Verena walk through the garden and down to the water with the intruder. She remained as she had collapsed, quite prostrate; her attitude was the same as that other time Verena had found her waiting, in New York. What Olive was likely to say to her first the girl scarcely knew; her mind, at any rate, was full of an intention of her own. She went straight to her and fell on her knees before her, taking hold of the hands which were clasped together, with nervous intensity, in Miss Chancellor's lap. Verena remained a moment, looking up at her, and then said:

"There is something I want to tell you now, without a moment's delay; something I didn't tell you at the time it happened, nor afterwards. Mr. Ransom came out to see me once, at Cambridge, a little while before we went to New York. He spent a couple of hours with me; we took a walk together and saw the colleges. It was after that that he wrote to me—when I answered his letter, as I told you in New York. I didn't tell you then of his visit. We had a great deal of talk about him, and I kept that back. I did so on purpose; I can't explain why, except that I didn't like to tell you, and that I thought it better. But now I want you to know everything; when you know that, you *will* know everything. It was only one visit—about two hours. I enjoyed it very much—he seemed so much interested. One reason I didn't tell you was that I didn't want you to know that he had come on to Boston, and called on me in Cambridge, without going to see you. I

thought it might affect you disagreeably. I suppose you will think I deceived you; certainly I left you with a wrong impression. But now I want you to know all—all!"

Verena spoke with breathless haste and eagerness; there was a kind of passion in the way she tried to expiate her former want of candor. Olive listened, staring; at first she seemed scarcely to understand. But Verena perceived that she understood sufficiently when she broke out: "You deceived me—you deceived me! Well, I must say I like your deceit better than such dreadful revelations! And what does anything matter when he has come after you now? What does he want—what has he come for?"

"He has come to ask me to be his wife."

Verena said this with the same eagerness, with as determined an air of not incurring any reproach this time. But as soon as she had spoken she buried her head in Olive's lap.

Olive made no attempt to raise it again, and returned none of the pressure of her hands; she only sat silent for a time, during which Verena wondered that the idea of the episode at Cambridge, laid bare only after so many months, should not have struck her more deeply. Presently she saw it was because the horror of what had just happened drew her off from it. At last Olive asked: "Is that what he told you, off there by the water?"

"Yes"—and Verena looked up—"he wanted me to know it right away. He says it's only fair to you that he should give notice of his intentions. He wants to try and make me like him—so he says. He wants to see more of me, and he wants me to know him better."

Olive lay back in her chair, with dilated eyes and parted lips. "Verena Tarrant, what *is* there between you? what *can* I hold on to, what *can* I believe? Two hours, in Cambridge, before we went to New York?" The sense that Verena had been perfidious there—perfidious in her reticence—now began to roll over her. "Mercy of heaven, how you did act!"

"Olive, it was to spare you."

"To spare me? if you really wished to spare me he wouldn't be here now!"

Miss Chancellor flashed this out with a sudden violence, a spasm which threw Verena off and made her rise to her feet. For an instant the two young women stood confronted, and a person who had seen them at that moment might have taken them for enemies rather than friends. But any such opposition could last but a few seconds. Verena replied, with a tremor in her voice which was not that of passion, but of charity: "Do you mean that I expected him, that I brought him? I never in my life was more surprised at anything than when I saw him there."

"Hasn't he the delicacy of one of his own slave-drivers? Doesn't he know you loathe him?"

Verena looked at her friend with a degree of majesty which, with her, was rare. "I don't loathe him—I only dislike his opinions."

"Dislike! Oh, misery!" And Olive turned away to the open window, leaning her forehead against the lifted sash.

Verena hesitated, then went to her, passing her arm round her. "Don't scold me! help me—help me!" she murmured.

Olive gave her a sidelong look; then, catching her up and facing her again—"Will you come away, now, by the next train?"

"Flee from him again, as I did in New York? No, no, Olive Chancellor, that's not the way," Verena went on, reasoningly, as if all the wisdom of the ages were seated on her lips. "Then how can we leave Miss Birdseye, in her state? We must stay here—we must fight it out here."

"Why not be honest, if you have been false—really honest, not only half so? Why not tell him plainly that you love him?"

"Love him, Olive? why, I scarcely know him."

"You'll have a chance, if he stays a month!"

"I don't dislike him, certainly, as you do. But how can I love him when he tells me he wants me to give up everything, all our work, our faith, our future, never to give another address, to open my lips in public? How can I consent to that?" Verena went on, smiling strangely.

"He asks you that, just that way?"

"No; it's not that way. It's very kindly."

"Kindly?" Heaven help you, don't grovel! Doesn't he know it's my house?" Olive added, in a moment.

"Of course he won't come into it, if you forbid him."

"So that you may meet him in other places—on the shore, in the country?"

"I certainly shan't avoid him, hide away from him," said Verena, proudly. "I thought I made you believe, in New York, that I really cared for our aspirations. The way for me then is to meet him, feeling conscious of my strength. What if I do like him? what does it matter? I like my work in the world, I like everything I believe in, better."

Olive listened to this, and the memory of how, in the house in Tenth Street, Verena had rebuked her doubts, professed her own faith anew, came back to her with a force which made the present situation appear slightly less terrific. Nevertheless, she gave no assent to the girl's logic; she only replied: "But you didn't meet him there; you hurried away from New York, after I was willing you should stay. He affected

you very much there; you were not so calm when you came back to me from your expedition to the park as you pretend to be now. To get away from him you gave up all the rest."

"I know I wasn't so calm. But now I have had three months to think about it—about the way he affected me there. I take it very quietly."

"No, you don't; you are not calm now!"

Verena was silent a moment, while Olive's eyes continued to search her, accuse her, condemn her. "It's all the more reason you shouldn't give me stab after stab," she replied, with a gentleness which was infinitely touching.

It had an instant effect upon Olive; she burst into tears, threw herself on her friend's bosom. "Oh, don't desert me—don't desert me, or you'll kill me in torture," she moaned, shuddering.

"You must help me—you must help me!" cried Verena, imploringly too.

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Basil Ransom spent nearly a month at Marmion; in announcing this fact I am very conscious of its extraordinary character. Poor Olive may well have been thrown back into her alarms by his presenting himself there; for after her return from New York she took to her soul the conviction that she had really done with him. Not only did the impulse of revulsion under which Verena had demanded that their departure from Tenth Street should be immediate appear to her a proof that it had been sufficient for her young friend to touch Mr. Ransom's moral texture with her finger, as it were, in order to draw back forever; but what she had learned from her companion of his own manifestations, his apparent disposition to throw up the game, added to her feeling of security. He had spoken to Verena of their little excursion as his last opportunity, let her know that he regarded it not as the beginning of a more intimate acquaintance but as the end even of such relations as already existed between them. He gave her up, for reasons best known to himself; if he wanted to frighten Olive he judged that he had frightened her enough: his Southern chivalry suggested to him perhaps that he ought to let her off before he had worried her to death. Doubtless, too, he had perceived how vain it was to hope to make Verena abjure a faith so solidly founded; and though he admired her enough to wish to possess her on his own terms, he shrank from the mortification which the future would have in keeping for him—that of finding that, after six months of courting and in spite of all her sympathy, her desire to do what people expected of her, she despised his opinions as much as the first day. Olive Chancellor was able to a certain extent to believe what she wished to believe, and that was one reason why she had twisted Verena's flight from New York, just after she let her friend see how much she should like to drink deeper of the cup, into a warrant for living in a fool's paradise. If she had been less afraid, she would have read things more clearly; she would have seen that we don't run away from people unless we fear them and that we don't fear them unless we know that we are unarmed. Verena feared Basil Ransom now (though this time she declined to run) ; but now she had taken up her weapons, she had told Olive she was exposed, she had asked *her* to be her defense. Poor Olive was stricken as she had never been before, but the extremity of her danger gave her a desperate energy. The only comfort in her situation was that this time Verena had confessed her peril, had thrown herself into her hands. "I like him—I can't help it—I do like him. I don't want to marry him, I don't want to embrace his ideas, which are unspeakably false and horrible; but I like him better than any gentleman I have seen." So much as this the girl announced to her friend as soon as the conversation of which I have just given a sketch was resumed, as it was very soon, you may be sure, and very often, in the course of the next few days. That was her way of saying that a great crisis had arrived in her life, and the statement needed very little amplification to stand as a shy avowal that she too had succumbed to the universal passion. Olive had had her suspicions, her terrors, before; but she perceived now how idle and foolish they had been, and that this was a different affair from any of the "phases" of which she had hitherto anxiously watched the development. As I say, she felt it to be a considerable mercy that Verena's attitude was frank, for it gave her something to take hold of; she could no longer be put off with sophistries about receiving visits from handsome and unscrupulous young men for the sake of the opportunities it gave one to convert them. She took hold, accordingly, with passion, with fury; after the shock of Ransom's arrival had passed away she determined that he should not find her chilled into dumb submission. Verena had told her that she wanted her to hold her tight, to rescue her; and there was no fear that, for an instant, she should sleep at her post.

"I like him—I like him; but I want to hate——"

"You want to hate him!" Olive broke in.

"No, I want to hate my liking. I want you to keep before me all the reasons why I should—many of them so fearfully important. Don't let me lose sight of anything! Don't be afraid I shall not be grateful when you remind me."

That was one of the singular speeches that Verena made in the course of their constant discussion of the terrible question, and it must be confessed that she made a great many. The strangest of all was when she protested, as she did again and again to Olive, against the idea of their seeking safety in retreat. She said there was a want of dignity in it—that she had been ashamed, afterwards, of what she had done in rushing away from New York. This care for her moral appearance was, on Verena's part, something new; inasmuch as, though she had struck that note on previous occasions—had insisted on its being her duty to face the accidents and alarms of life—she had never erected such a standard in the face of a disaster so sharply possible. It was not her habit either to talk or to think about her dignity, and when Olive found her taking that tone she felt more than ever that the dreadful, ominous, fatal part of the situation was

simply that now, for the first time in all the history of their sacred friendship, Verena was not sincere. She was not sincere when she told her that she wanted to be helped against Mr. Ransom—when she exhorted her, that way, to keep everything that was salutary and fortifying before her eyes. Olive did not go so far as to believe that she was playing a part and putting her off with words which, glossing over her treachery, only made it more cruel; she would have admitted that that treachery was as yet unwitting, that Verena deceived herself first of all, thinking she really wished to be saved. Her phrases about her dignity were insincere, as well as her pretext that they must stay to look after Miss Birdseye: as if Doctor Prance were not abundantly able to discharge that function and would not be enchanted to get them out of the house! Olive had perfectly divined by this time that Doctor Prance had no sympathy with their movement, no general ideas; that she was simply shut up to petty questions of physiological science and of her own professional activity. She would never have invited her down if she had realized this in advance so much as the doctor's dry detachment from all their discussions, their readings and practicings, her constant expeditions to fish and botanize, subsequently enabled her to do. She was very narrow, but it did seem as if she knew more about Miss Birdseye's peculiar physical conditions—they were *very* peculiar—than anyone else, and this was a comfort at a time when that admirable woman seemed to be suffering a loss of vitality.

"The great point is that it must be met some time, and it will be a tremendous relief to have it over. He is determined to have it out with me, and if the battle doesn't come off today we shall have to fight it tomorrow. I don't see why this isn't as good a time as any other. My lecture for the Music Hall is as good as finished, and I haven't got anything else to do; so I can give all my attention to our personal struggle. It requires a good deal, you would admit, if you knew how wonderfully he can talk. If we should leave this place tomorrow he would come after us to the very next one. He would follow us everywhere. A little while ago we could have escaped him, because he says that then he had no money. He hasn't got much now, but he has got enough to pay his way. He is so encouraged by the reception of his article by the editor of the 'Rational Review,' that he is sure that in future his pen will be a resource."

These remarks were uttered by Verena after Basil Ransom had been three days at Marmion, and when she reached this point her companion interrupted her with the inquiry, "Is that what he proposes to support you with—his pen?"

"Oh yes; of course he admits we should be terribly poor."

"And this vision of a literary career is based entirely upon an article that hasn't yet seen the light? I don't see how a man of any refinement can approach a woman with so beggarly an account of his position in life."

"He says he wouldn't—he would have been ashamed—three months ago; that was why, when we were in New York, and he felt, even then—well (so he says) all he feels now, he made up his mind not to persist, to let me go. But just lately a change has taken place; his state of mind altered completely, in the course of a week, in consequence of the letter that editor wrote him about his contribution, and his paying for it right off. It was a remarkably flattering letter. He says he believes in his future now; he has before him a vision of distinction, of influence, and of fortune, not great, perhaps, but sufficient to make life tolerable. He doesn't think life is very delightful, in the nature of things; but one of the best things a man can do with it is to get hold of some woman (of course, she must please him very much, to make it worth while), whom he may draw close to him."

"And couldn't he get hold of anyone but you—among all the exposed millions of our sex?" poor Olive groaned. "Why must he pick you out, when everything he knew about you showed you to be, exactly, the very last?"

"That's just what I have asked him, and he only remarks that there is no reasoning about such things. He fell in love with me that first evening, at Miss Birdseye's. So you see there was some ground for that mystic apprehension of yours. It seems as if I pleased him more than anyone."

Olive flung herself over on the couch, burying her face in the cushions, which she tumbled in her despair, and moaning out that he didn't love Verena, he never had loved her, it was only his hatred of their cause that made him pretend it; he wanted to do that an injury, to do it the worst he could think of. He didn't love her, he hated her, he only wanted to smother her, to crush her, to kill her—as she would infallibly see that he would if she listened to him. It was because he knew that her voice had magic in it, and from the moment he caught its first note he had determined to destroy it. It was not tenderness that moved him—it was devilish malignity; tenderness would be incapable of requiring the horrible sacrifice that he was not ashamed to ask, of requiring her to commit perjury and blasphemy, to desert a work, an interest, with which her very heart-strings were interlaced, to give the lie to her whole young past, to her purest, holiest ambitions. Olive put forward no claim of her own, breathed, at first, at least, not a word of remonstrance in the name of her personal loss, of their blighted union; she only dwelt upon the unspeakable tragedy of a defection from their standard, of a failure on Verena's part to carry out what she had undertaken, of the horror of seeing her bright career blotted out with darkness and tears, of the joy and elation that would fill the breast of all their adversaries at this illustrious, consummate proof of the fickleness, the futility, the predestined servility, of women. A man had only to whistle for her, and she

who had pretended most was delighted to come and kneel at his feet. Olive's most passionate protest was summed up in her saying that if Verena were to forsake them it would put back the emancipation of women a hundred years. She did not, during these dreadful days, talk continuously; she had long periods of pale, intensely anxious, watchful silence, interrupted by outbreaks of passionate argument, entreaty, invocation. It was Verena who talked incessantly, Verena who was in a state entirely new to her, and, as anyone could see, in an attitude entirely unnatural and overdone. If she was deceiving herself, as Olive said, there was something very affecting in her effort, her ingenuity. If she tried to appear to Olive impartial, coldly judicious, in her attitude with regard to Basil Ransom, and only anxious to see, for the moral satisfaction of the thing, how good a case, as a lover, he might make out for himself and how much he might touch her susceptibilities, she endeavored, still more earnestly, to practice this fraud upon her own imagination. She abounded in every proof that she should be in despair if she should be overborne, and she thought of arguments even more convincing, if possible, than Olive's, why she should hold on to her old faith, why she should resist even at the cost of acute temporary suffering. She was voluble, fluent, feverish; she was perpetually bringing up the subject, as if to encourage her friend, to show how she kept possession of her judgment, how independent she remained.

No stranger situation can be imagined than that of these extraordinary young women at this juncture; it was so singular on Verena's part, in particular, that I despair of presenting it to the reader with the air of reality. To understand it, one must bear in mind her peculiar frankness, natural and acquired, her habit of discussing questions, sentiments, moralities, her education, in the atmosphere of lecture-rooms, of *séances,* her familiarity with the vocabulary of emotion, the mysteries of "the spiritual life." She had learned to breathe and move in a rarefied air, as she would have learned to speak Chinese if her success in life had depended upon it; but this dazzling trick, and all her artlessly artful facilities, were not a part of her essence, an expression of her innermost preferences. What *was a* part of her essence was the extraordinary generosity with which she could expose herself, give herself away, turn herself inside out, for the satisfaction of a person who made demands of her. Olive, as we know, had made the reflection that no one was naturally less preoccupied with the idea of her dignity, and though Verena put it forward as an excuse for remaining where they were, it must be admitted that in reality she was very deficient in the desire to be consistent with herself. Olive had contributed with all her zeal to the development of Verena's gift; but I scarcely venture to think now, what she may have said to herself, in the secrecy of deep meditation, about the consequences of cultivating an abundant eloquence. Did she say that Verena was attempting to smother her now in her own phrases? did she view with dismay the fatal effect of trying to have an answer for everything? From Olive's condition during these lamentable weeks there is a certain propriety—a delicacy enjoined by the respect for misfortune—in averting our head. She neither ate nor slept; she could scarcely speak without bursting into tears; she felt so implacably, insidiously baffled. She remembered the magnanimity with which she had declined (the winter before the last) to receive the vow of eternal maidenhood which she had at first demanded and then put by as too crude a test, but which Verena, for a precious hour, forever flown, would *then* have been willing to take. She repented of it with bitterness and rage; and then she asked herself, more desperately still, whether even if she held that pledge she should be brave enough to enforce it in the face of actual complications. She believed that if it were in her power to say, "No, I won't let you off; I have your solemn word, and I won't!" Verena would bow to that degree and remain with her; but the magic would have passed out of her spirit forever, the sweetness out of their friendship, the efficacy out of their work. She said to her again and again that she had utterly changed since that hour she came to her, in New York, after her morning with Mr. Ransom, and sobbed out that they must hurry away. Then she had been wounded, outraged, sickened, and in the interval nothing had happened, nothing but that one exchange of letters, which she knew about, to bring her round to a shameless tolerance. Shameless Verena admitted it to be; she assented over and over to this proposition, and explained, as eagerly each time as if it were the first, what it was that had come to pass, what it was that had brought her round. It had simply come over her that she liked him, that this was the true point of view, the only one from which one could consider the situation in a way that would lead to what she called a *real* solution—a permanent rest. On this particular point Verena never responded, in the liberal way I have mentioned, without asseverating at the same time that what she desired most in the world was to prove (the picture Olive had held up from the first), that a woman *could* live on persistently, clinging to a great, vivifying, redemptory idea, without the help of a man. To testify to the end against the stale superstition—mother of every misery—that those gentry were as indispensable as they had proclaimed themselves on the house-tops—that, she passionately protested, was as inspiring a thought in the present poignant crisis as it had ever been.

The one grain of comfort that Olive extracted from the terrors that pressed upon her was that now she knew the worst; she knew it since Verena had told her, after so long and so ominous a reticence, of the detestable episode at Cambridge. That seemed to her the worst, because it had been thunder in a clear sky; the incident had sprung from a quarter from which, months before, all symptoms appeared to have vanished. Though Verena had now done all she could to make up for her perfidious silence by repeating everything that passed between them as she sat with Mr. Ransom in Monadnoc Place or strolled with him

through the colleges, it imposed itself upon Olive that that occasion was the key of all that had happened since, that he had then obtained an irremediable hold upon her. If Verena had spoken at the time, she would never have let her go to New York; the sole compensation for that hideous mistake was that the girl, recognizing it to the full, evidently deemed now that she couldn't be communicative enough. There were certain afternoons in August, long, beautiful and terrible, when one felt that the summer was rounding its curve, and the rustle of the full-leaved trees in the slanting golden light, in the breeze that ought to be delicious, seemed the voice of the coming autumn, of the warnings and dangers of life—portentous, insufferable hours when, as she sat under the softly swaying vine-leaves of the trellis with Miss Birdseye and tried, in order to still her nerves, to read something aloud to her guest, the sound of her own quavering voice made her think more of that baleful day at Cambridge than even of the fact that at that very moment Verena was "off" with Mr. Ransom—had gone to take the little daily walk with him to which it had been arranged that their enjoyment of each other's society should be reduced. Arranged, I say; but that is not exactly the word to describe the compromise arrived at by a kind of tacit exchange of tearful entreaty and tightened grasp, after Ransom had made it definite to Verena that he was indeed going to stay a month and she had promised that she would not resort to base evasions, to fight (which would avail her nothing, he notified her), but would give him a chance, would listen to him a few minutes every day. He had insisted that the few minutes should be an hour, and the way to spend it was obvious. They wandered along the waterside to a rocky, shrub-covered point, which made a walk of just the right duration. Here all the homely languor of the region, the mild, fragrant Cape quality, the sweetness of white sands, quiet waters, low promontories where there were paths among the barberries and tidal pools gleamed in the sunset—here all the spirit of a ripe summer afternoon seemed to hang in the air. There were wood-walks too; they sometimes followed bosky uplands, where accident had grouped the trees with odd effects of "style," and where in grassy intervals and fragrant nooks of rest they came out upon sudden patches of Arcady. In such places Verena listened to her companion with her watch in her hand, and she wondered, very sincerely, how he could care for a girl who made the conditions of courtship so odious. He had recognized, of course, at the very first, that he could not inflict himself again upon Miss Chancellor, and after that awkward morning call I have described he did not again, for the first three weeks of his stay at Marmion, penetrate into the cottage whose back windows overlooked the deserted shipyard. Olive, as may be imagined, made, on this occasion, no protest for the sake of being ladylike or of preventing him from putting her apparently in the wrong. The situation between them was too grim; it was war to the knife, it was a question of which should pull hardest. So Verena took a tryst with the young man as if she had been a maid-servant and Basil Ransom a "follower." They met a little way from the house; beyond it, outside the village.

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Olive thought she knew the worst, as we have perceived; but the worst was really something she could not know, inasmuch as up to this time Verena chose as little to confide to her on that one point as she was careful to expatiate with her on every other. The change that had taken place in the object of Basil Ransom's merciless devotion since the episode in New York was, briefly, just this change—that the words he had spoken to her there about her genuine vocation, as distinguished from the hollow and factitious ideal with which her family and her association with Olive Chancellor had saddled her—these words, the most effective and penetrating he had uttered, had sunk into her soul and worked and fermented there. She had come at last to believe them, and that was the alteration, the transformation. They had kindled a light in which she saw herself afresh and, strange to say, liked herself better than in the old exaggerated glamour of the lecture-lamps. She could not tell Olive this yet, for it struck at the root of everything, and the dreadful, delightful sensation filled her with a kind of awe at all that it implied and portended. She was to burn everything she had adored; she was to adore everything she had burned. The extraordinary part of it was that though she felt the situation to be, as I say, tremendously serious, she was not ashamed of the treachery which she—yes, decidedly, by this time she must admit it to herself—she meditated. It was simply that the truth had changed sides; that radiant image began to look at her from Basil Ransom's expressive eyes. She loved, she was in love—she felt it in every throb of her being. Instead of being constituted by nature for entertaining that sentiment in an exceptionally small degree (which had been the implication of her whole crusade, the warrant for her offer of old to Olive to renounce), she was framed, apparently, to allow it the largest range, the highest intensity. It was always passion, in fact; but now the object was other. Formerly she had been convinced that the fire of her spirit was a kind of double flame, one half of which was responsive friendship for a most extraordinary person, and the other pity for the sufferings of women in general. Verena gazed aghast at the colorless dust into which, in three short months (counting from the episode in New York), such a conviction as that could crumble; she felt it must be a magical touch that could bring about such a cataclysm. Why Basil Ransom had been deputed by fate to exercise this spell was more than she could say—poor Verena, who up to so lately had flattered herself that she had a wizard's wand in her own pocket.

When she saw him a little way off, about five o'clock—the hour she usually went out to meet him—waiting for her at a bend of the road which lost itself, after a winding, straggling mile or two, in the indented, insulated "point," where the wandering bee droned through the hot hours with a vague, misguided flight, she felt that his tall, watching figure, with the low horizon behind, represented well the importance, the towering eminence he had in her mind—the fact that he was just now, to her vision, the most definite and upright, the most incomparable, object in the world. If he had not been at his post when she expected him she would have had to stop and lean against something, for weakness; her whole being would have throbbed more painfully than it throbbed at present, though finding him there made her nervous enough. And who was he, what was he? she asked herself. What did he offer her besides a chance (in which there was no compensation of brilliancy or fashion), to falsify, in a conspicuous manner, every hope and pledge she had hitherto given? He allowed her, certainly, no illusion on the subject of the fate she should meet as his wife; he flung over it no rosiness of promised ease; he let her know that she should be poor, withdrawn from view, a partner of his struggle, of his severe, hard, unique stoicism. When he spoke of such things as these, and bent his eyes on her, she could not keep the tears from her own; she felt that to throw herself into his life (bare and arid as for the time it was), was the condition of happiness for her, and yet that the obstacles were terrible, cruel. It must not be thought that the revolution which was taking place in her was unaccompanied with suffering. She suffered less than Olive certainly, for her bent was not, like her friend's, in that direction; but as the wheel of her experience went round she had the sensation of being ground very small indeed. With her light, bright texture, her complacent responsiveness, her genial, graceful, ornamental cast, her desire to keep on pleasing others at the time when a force she had never felt before was pushing her to please herself, poor Verena lived in these days in a state of moral tension—with a sense of being strained and aching—which she didn't betray more only because it was absolutely not in her power to look desperate. An immense pity for Olive sat in her heart, and she asked herself how far it was necessary to go in the path of self-sacrifice. Nothing was wanting to make the wrong she should do her complete; she had deceived her up to the very last; only three months earlier she had reasserted her vows, given her word, with every show of fidelity and enthusiasm. There were hours when it seemed to Verena that she must really push her inquiry no further, but content herself with the conclusion that she loved as deeply as a woman could love and that it didn't make any difference.

She felt Olive's grasp too clinching, too terrible. She said to herself that she should never dare, that she might as well give up early as late; that the scene, at the end, would be something she couldn't face; that she had no right to blast the poor creature's whole future. She had a vision of those dreadful years; she knew that Olive would never get over the disappointment. It would touch her in the point where she felt everything most keenly; she would be incurably lonely and eternally humiliated. It was a very peculiar thing, their friendship; it had elements which made it probably as complete as any (between women) that had ever existed. Of course it had been more on Olive's side than on hers, she had always known that; but that, again, didn't make any difference. It was of no use for her to tell herself that Olive had begun it entirely and she had only responded out of a kind of charmed politeness, at first, to a tremendous appeal. She had lent herself, given herself, utterly, and she ought to have known better if she didn't mean to abide by it. At the end of three weeks she felt that her inquiry was complete, but that after all nothing was gained except an immense interest in Basil Ransom's views and the prospect of an eternal heartache. He had told her he wanted her to know him, and now she knew him pretty thoroughly. She knew him and she adored him, but it didn't make any difference. To give him up or to give Olive up—this effort would be the greater of the two.

If Basil Ransom had the advantage, as far back as that day in New York, of having struck a note which was to reverberate, it may easily be imagined that he did not fail to follow it up. If he had projected a new light into Verena's mind, and made the idea of giving herself to a man more agreeable to her than that of giving herself to a movement, he found means to deepen this illumination, to drag her former standard in the dust. He was in a very odd situation indeed, carrying on his siege with his hands tied. As he had to do everything in an hour a day, he perceived that he must confine himself to the essential. The essential was to show her how much he loved her, and then to press, to press, always to press. His hovering about Miss Chancellor's habitation without going in was a strange regimen to be subjected to, and he was sorry not to see more of Miss Birdseye, besides often not knowing what to do with himself in the mornings and evenings. Fortunately he had brought plenty of books (volumes of rusty aspect, picked up at New York bookstalls), and in such an affair as this he could take the less when the more was forbidden him. For the mornings, sometimes, he had the resource of Doctor Prance, with whom he made a great many excursions on the water. She was devoted to boating and an ardent fisherwoman, and they used to pull out into the bay together, cast their lines, and talk a prodigious amount of heresy. She met him, as Verena met him, "in the environs," but in a different spirit. He was immensely amused at her attitude, and saw that nothing in the world could, as he expressed it, make her wink. She would never blench nor show surprise; she had an air of taking everything abnormal for granted; betrayed no consciousness of the oddity of Ransom's situation; said nothing to indicate she had noticed that Miss Chancellor was in a frenzy or that Verena had a daily appointment. You might have supposed from her manner that it was as natural for Ransom to sit on a fence half a mile off as in one of the red rocking chairs, of the so-called "Shaker" species, which adorned Miss Chancellor's back veranda. The only thing our young man didn't like about Doctor Prance was the impression she gave him (out of the crevices of her reticence he hardly knew how it leaked), that she thought Verena rather slim. She took an ironical view of almost any kind of courtship, and he could see she didn't wonder women were such featherheads, so long as, whatever brittle follies they cultivated, they could get men to come and sit on fences for them. Doctor Prance told him Miss Birdseye noticed nothing; she had sunk, within a few days, into a kind of transfigured torpor; she didn't seem to know whether Mr. Ransom were anywhere round or not. She guessed she thought he had just come down for a day and gone off again; she probably supposed he just wanted to get toned up a little by Miss Tarrant. Sometimes, out in the boat, when she looked at him in vague, sociable silence, while she waited for a bite (she delighted in a bite), she had an expression of diabolical shrewdness. When Ransom was not scorching there beside her (he didn't mind the sun of Massachusetts), he lounged about in the pastoral land which hung (at a very moderate elevation), above the shore. He always had a book in his pocket, and he lay under whispering trees and kicked his heels and made up his mind on what side he should take Verena the next time. At the end of a fortnight he had succeeded (so he believed, at least), far better than he had hoped, in this sense, that the girl had now the air of making much more light of her "gift." He was indeed quite appalled at the facility with which she threw it over, gave up the idea that it was useful and precious. That had been what he wanted her to do, and the fact of the sacrifice (once she had fairly looked at it), costing her so little only proved his contention, only made it clear that it was not necessary to her happiness to spend half her life ranting (no matter how prettily), in public. All the same he said to himself that, to make up for the loss of whatever was sweet in the reputation of the thing, he should have to be tremendously nice to her in all the coming years. During the first week he was at Marmion she made of him an inquiry which touched on this point.

"Well, if it's all a mere delusion, why should this facility have been given me—why should I have been saddled with a superfluous talent? I don't care much about it—I don't mind telling you that; but I confess I should like to know what is to become of all that part of me, if I retire into private life, and live, as you say, simply to be charming for you. I shall be like a singer with a beautiful voice (you have told me yourself my voice is beautiful), who has accepted some decree of never raising a note. Isn't that a great

waste, a great violation of nature? Were not our talents given us to use, and have we any right to smother them and deprive our fellow-creatures of such pleasure as they may confer? In the arrangement you propose" (that was Verena's way of speaking of the question of their marriage), "I don't see what provision is made for the poor faithful, dismissed servant. It is all very well to be charming to you, but there are people who have told me that once I get on a platform I am charming to all the world. There is no harm in my speaking of that, because you have told me so yourself. Perhaps you intend to have a platform erected in our front parlor, where I can address you every evening, and put you to sleep after your work. I say our *front* parlor, as if it were certain we should have two! It doesn't look as if our means would permit that—and we must have some place to dine, if there is to be a platform in our sitting room."

"My dear young woman, it will be easy to solve the difficulty: the dining-table itself shall be our platform, and you shall mount on top of that." This was Basil Ransom's sportive reply to his companion's very natural appeal for light, and the reader will remark that if it led her to push her investigation no further, she was very easily satisfied. There was more reason, however, as well as more appreciation of a very considerable mystery, in what he went on to say. "Charming to me, charming to all the world? What will become of your charm?—is that what you want to know? It will be about five thousand times greater than it is now; that's what will become of it. We shall find plenty of room for your facility; it will lubricate our whole existence. Believe me, Miss Tarrant, these things will take care of themselves. You won't sing in the Music Hall, but you will sing to me; you will sing to every one who knows you and approaches you. Your gift is indestructible; don't talk as if I either wanted to wipe it out or should be able to make it a particle less divine. I want to give it another direction, certainly; but I don't want to stop your activity. Your gift is the gift of expression, and there is nothing I can do for you that will make you less expressive. It won't gush out at a fixed hour and on a fixed day, but it will irrigate, it will fertilize, it will brilliantly adorn your conversation. Think how delightful it will be when your influence becomes really social. Your facility, as you call it, will simply make you, in conversation, the most charming woman in America."

It is to be feared, indeed, that Verena was easily satisfied (convinced, I mean, not that she ought to succumb to him, but that there were lovely, neglected, almost unsuspected truths on his side); and there is further evidence on the same head in the fact that after the first once or twice she found nothing to say to him (much as she was always saying to herself), about the cruel effect her apostasy would have upon Olive. She forbore to plead that reason after she had seen how angry it made him, and with how almost savage a contempt he denounced so flimsy a pretext. He wanted to know since when it was more becoming to take up with a morbid old maid than with an honorable young man; and when Verena pronounced the sacred name of friendship he inquired what fanatical sophistry excluded him from a similar privilege. She had told him, in a moment of expansion (Verena believed she was immensely on her guard, but her guard was very apt to be lowered), that his visits to Marmion cast in Olive's view a remarkable light upon his chivalry; she chose to regard his resolute pursuit of Verena as a covert persecution of herself. Verena repented, as soon as she had spoken, of having given further currency to this taunt; but she perceived the next moment no harm was done, Basil Ransom taking in perfectly good part Miss Chancellor's reflections on his delicacy, and making them the subject of much free laughter. She could not know, for in the midst of his hilarity the young man did not compose himself to tell her, that he had made up his mind on this question before he left New York—as long ago as when he wrote her the note (subsequent to her departure from that city), to which allusion has already been made, and which was simply the fellow of the letter addressed to her after his visit to Cambridge: a friendly, respectful, yet rather pregnant sign that, decidedly, on second thoughts, separation didn't imply for him the intention of silence. We know a little about his second thoughts, as much as is essential, and especially how the occasion of their springing up had been the windfall of an editor's encouragement. The importance of that encouragement, to Basil's imagination, was doubtless much augmented by his desire for an excuse to take up again a line of behavior which he had forsworn (small as had, as yet, been his opportunity to indulge in it), very much less than he supposed; still, it worked an appreciable revolution in his view of his case, and made him ask himself what amount of consideration he should (from the most refined Southern point of view), owe Miss Chancellor in the event of his deciding to go after Verena Tarrant in earnest. He was not slow to decide that he owed her none. Chivalry had to do with one's relations with people one hated, not with those one loved. He didn't hate poor Miss Olive, though she might make him yet; and even if he did, any chivalry was all moonshine which should require him to give up the girl he adored in order that this third cousin should see he could be gallant. Chivalry was forbearance and generosity with regard to the weak; and there was nothing weak about Miss Olive, she was a fighting woman, and she would fight him to the death, giving him not an inch of odds. He felt that she was fighting there all day long, in her cottage-fortress; her resistance was in the air he breathed, and Verena came out to him sometimes quite limp and pale from the tussle.

It was in the same jocose spirit with which he regarded Olive's view of the sort of standard a Mississippian should live up to that he talked to Verena about the lecture she was preparing for her great exhibition at the Music Hall. He learned from her that she was to take the field in the manner of Mrs. Farrinder, for a winter campaign, carrying with her a tremendous big gun. Her engagements were all

made, her route was marked out; she expected to repeat her lecture in about fifty different places. It was to be called "A Woman's Reason," and both Olive and Miss Birdseye thought it, so far as they could tell in advance, her most promising effort. She wasn't going to trust to inspiration this time; she didn't want to meet a big Boston audience without knowing where she was. Inspiration, moreover, seemed rather to have faded away; in consequence of Olive's influence she had read and studied so much that it seemed now as if everything must take form beforehand. Olive was a splendid critic, whether he liked her or not, and she had made her go over every word of her lecture twenty times. There wasn't an intonation she hadn't made her practice; it was very different from the old system, when her father had worked her up. If Basil considered women superficial, it was a pity he couldn't see what Olive's standard of preparation was, or be present at their rehearsals, in the evening, in their little parlor. Ransom's state of mind in regard to the affair at the Music Hall was simply this—that he was determined to circumvent it if he could. He covered it with ridicule, in talking of it to Verena, and the shafts he leveled at it went so far that he could see she thought he exaggerated his dislike to it. In point of fact he could not have overstated that; so odious did the idea seem to him that she was soon to be launched in a more infatuated career. He vowed to himself that she should never take that fresh start which would commit her irretrievably if she should succeed (and she would succeed—he had not the slightest doubt of her power to produce a sensation in the Music Hall), to the acclamations of the newspapers. He didn't care for her engagements, her campaigns, or all the expectancy of her friends; to "squelch" all that, at a stroke, was the dearest wish of his heart. It would represent to him his own success, it would symbolize his victory. It became a fixed idea with him, and he warned her again and again. When she laughed and said she didn't see how he could stop her unless he kidnapped her, he really pitied her for not perceiving, beneath his ominous pleasantries, the firmness of his resolution. He felt almost capable of kidnapping her. It was palpably in the air that she would become "widely popular," and that idea simply sickened him. He felt as differently as possible about it from Mr. Matthias Pardon.

One afternoon, as he returned with Verena from a walk which had been accomplished completely within the prescribed conditions, he saw, from a distance, Doctor Prance, who had emerged bareheaded from the cottage, and, shading her eyes from the red, declining sun, was looking up and down the road. It was part of the regulation that Ransom should separate from Verena before reaching the house, and they had just paused to exchange their last words (which every day promoted the situation more than any others), when Doctor Prance began to beckon to them with much animation. They hurried forward, Verena pressing her hand to her heart, for she had instantly guessed that something terrible had happened to Olive—she had given out, fainted away, perhaps fallen dead, with the cruelty of the strain. Doctor Prance watched them come, with a curious look in her face; it was not a smile, but a kind of exaggerated intimation that she noticed nothing. In an instant she had told them what was the matter. Miss Birdseye had had a sudden weakness; she had remarked abruptly that she was dying, and her pulse, sure enough, had fallen to nothing. She was down on the piazza with Miss Chancellor and herself, and they had tried to get her up to bed. But she wouldn't let them move her; she was passing away, and she wanted to pass away just there, in such a pleasant place, in her customary chair, looking at the sunset. She asked for Miss Tarrant, and Miss Chancellor told her she was out—walking with Mr. Ransom. Then she wanted to know if Mr. Ransom was still there—she supposed he had gone. (Basil knew, by Verena, apart from this, that his name had not been mentioned to the old lady since the morning he saw her.) She expressed a wish to see him—she had something to say to him; and Miss Chancellor told her that he would be back soon, with Verena, and that they would bring him in. Miss Birdseye said she hoped they wouldn't be long, because she was sinking; and Doctor Prance now added, like a person who knew what she was talking about, that it was, in fact, the end. She had darted out two or three times to look for them, and they must step right in. Verena had scarcely given her time to tell her story; she had already rushed into the house. Ransom followed with Doctor Prance, conscious that for him the occasion was doubly solemn; inasmuch as if he was to see poor Miss Birdseye yield up her philanthropic soul, he was on the other hand doubtless to receive from Miss Chancellor a reminder that *she* had no intention of quitting the game.

By the time he had made this reflection he stood in the presence of his kinswoman and her venerable guest, who was sitting just as he had seen her before, muffled and bonneted, on the back piazza of the cottage. Olive Chancellor was on one side of her, holding one of her hands, and on the other was Verena, who had dropped on her knees, close to her, bending over those of the old lady. "Did you ask for me—did you want me?" the girl said, tenderly. "I will never leave you again."

"Oh, I won't keep you long. I only wanted to see you once more." Miss Birdseye's voice was very low, like that of a person breathing with difficulty; but it had no painful nor querulous note—it expressed only the cheerful weariness which had marked all this last period of her life, and which seemed to make it now as blissful as it was suitable that she should pass away. Her head was thrown back against the top of the chair, the ribbon which confined her ancient hat hung loose, and the late afternoon light covered her octogenarian face and gave it a kind of fairness, a double placidity. There was, to Ransom, something almost august in the trustful renunciation of her countenance; something in it seemed to say that she had been ready long before, but as the time was not ripe she had waited, with her usual faith that all was for

the best; only, at present, since the right conditions met, she couldn't help feeling that it was quite a luxury, the greatest she had ever tasted. Ransom knew why it was that Verena had tears in her eyes as she looked up at her patient old friend; she had spoken to him, often, during the last three weeks, of the stories Miss Birdseye had told her of the great work of her life, her mission, repeated year after year, among the Southern blacks. She had gone among them with every precaution, to teach them to read and write; she had carried them Bibles and told them of the friends they had in the North who prayed for their deliverance. Ransom knew that Verena didn't reproduce these legends with a view to making him ashamed of his Southern origin, his connection with people who, in a past not yet remote, had made that kind of apostleship necessary; he knew this because she had heard what he thought of all that chapter himself; he had given her a kind of historical summary of the slavery-question which left her no room to say that he was more tender to that particular example of human imbecility than he was to any other. But she had told him that this was what *she* would have liked to do—to wander, alone, with her life in her hand, on an errand of mercy, through a country in which society was arrayed against her; she would have liked it much better than simply talking about the right from the gaslighted vantage of the New England platform. Ransom had replied simply "Balderdash!" it being his theory, as we have perceived, that he knew much more about Verena's native bent than the young lady herself. This did not, however, as he was perfectly aware, prevent her feeling that she had come too late for the heroic age of New England life, and regarding Miss Birdseye as a battered, immemorial monument of it. Ransom could share such an admiration as that, especially at this moment; he had said to Verena, more than once, that he wished he might have met the old lady in Carolina or Georgia before the war—shown her round among the negroes and talked over New England ideas with her; there were a good many he didn't care much about now, but at that time they would have been tremendously refreshing. Miss Birdseye had given herself away so lavishly all her life that it was rather odd there was anything left of her for the supreme surrender. When he looked at Olive he saw that she meant to ignore him; and during the few minutes he remained on the spot his kinswoman never met his eye. She turned away, indeed, as soon as Doctor Prance said, leaning over Miss Birdseye, "I have brought Mr. Ransom to you. Don't you remember you asked for him?"

"I am very glad to see you again," Ransom remarked. "It was very good of you to think of me." At the sound of his voice Olive rose and left her place; she sank into a chair at the other end of the piazza, turning round to rest her arms on the back and bury her head in them.

Miss Birdseye looked at the young man still more dimly than she had ever done before. "I thought you were gone. You never came back."

"He spends all his time in long walks; he enjoys the country so much," Verena said.

"Well, it's very beautiful, what I see from here. I haven't been strong enough to move round since the first days. But I am going to move now." She smiled when Ransom made a gesture as if to help her, and added: "Oh, I don't mean I am going to move out of my chair."

"Mr. Ransom has been out in a boat with me several times. I have been showing him how to cast a line," said Doctor Prance, who appeared to deprecate a sentimental tendency.

"Oh, well, then, you have been one of our party; there seems to be every reason why you should feel that you belong to us." Miss Birdseye looked at the visitor with a sort of misty earnestness, as if she wished to communicate with him further; then her glance turned slightly aside; she tried to see what had become of Olive. She perceived that Miss Chancellor had withdrawn herself, and, closing her eyes, she mused, ineffectually, on the mystery she had not grasped, the peculiarity of Basil Ransom's relations with her hostess. She was visibly too weak to concern herself with it very actively; she only felt, now that she seemed really to be going, a desire to reconcile and harmonize. But she presently exhaled a low, soft sigh—a kind of confession that it was too mixed, that she gave it up. Ransom had feared for a moment that she was about to indulge in some appeal to Olive, some attempt to make him join hands with that young lady, as a supreme satisfaction to herself. But he saw that her strength failed her, and that, besides, things were getting less clear to her; to his considerable relief, inasmuch as, though he would not have objected to joining hands, the expression of Miss Chancellor's figure and her averted face, with their desperate collapse, showed him well enough how *she* would have met such a proposal. What Miss Birdseye clung to, with benignant perversity, was the idea that, in spite of his exclusion from the house, which was perhaps only the result of a certain high-strung jealousy on Olive's part of her friend's other personal ties, Verena had drawn him in, had made him sympathize with the great reform and desire to work for it. Ransom saw no reason why such an illusion should be dear to Miss Birdseye; his contact with her in the past had been so momentary that he could not account for her taking an interest in his views, in his throwing his weight into the right scale. It was part of the general desire for justice that fermented within her, the passion for progress; and it was also in some degree her interest in Verena—a suspicion, innocent and idyllic, as any such suspicion on Miss Birdseye's part must be, that there was something between them, that the closest of all unions (as Miss Birdseye at least supposed it was), was preparing itself. Then his being a Southerner gave a point to the whole thing; to bring round a Southerner would be a real encouragement for one who had seen, even at a time when she was already an old woman, what was the tone of opinion in the cotton States. Ransom had no wish to discourage her, and he bore well in mind the caution Doctor Prance had

given him about destroying her last theory. He only bowed his head very humbly, not knowing what he had done to earn the honor of being the subject of it. His eyes met Verena's as she looked up at him from her place at Miss Birdseye's feet, and he saw she was following his thought, throwing herself into it, and trying to communicate to him a wish. The wish touched him immensely; she was dreadfully afraid he would betray her to Miss Birdseye—let her know how she had cooled off. Verena was ashamed of that now, and trembled at the danger of exposure; her eyes adjured him to be careful of what he said. Her tremor made him glow a little in return, for it seemed to him the fullest confession of his influence she had yet made.

"We have been a very happy little party," she said to the old lady. "It is delightful that you should have been able to be with us all these weeks."

"It has been a great rest. I am very tired. I can't speak much. It has been a lovely time. I have done so much—so many things."

"I guess I wouldn't talk much, Miss Birdseye," said Doctor Prance, who had now knelt down on the other side of her. "We know how much you have done. Don't you suppose every one knows *your* life?"

"It isn't much—only I tried to take hold. When I look back from here, from where we've sat, I can measure the progress. That's what I wanted to say to you and Mr. Ransom—because I'm going fast. Hold on to me, that right; but you can't keep me. I don't want to stay now; I presume I shall join some of the others that we lost long ago. Their faces come back to me now, quite fresh. It seems as if they might be waiting; as if they were all there; as if they wanted to hear. You mustn't think there's no progress because you don't see it all right off; that's what I wanted to say. It isn't till you have gone a long way that you can feel what's been done. That's what I see when I look back from here; I see that the community wasn't half waked up when I was young."

"It is you that have waked it up more than anyone else, and it's for that we honor you, Miss Birdseye!" Verena cried, with a sudden violence of emotion. "If you were to live for a thousand years, you would think only of others—you would think only of helping on humanity. You are our heroine, you are our saint, and there has never been anyone like you!" Verena had no glance for Ransom now, and there was neither deprecation nor entreaty in her face. A wave of contrition, of shame, had swept over her—a quick desire to atone for her secret swerving by a renewed recognition of the nobleness of such a life as Miss Birdseye's.

"Oh, I haven't effected very much; I have only cared and hoped. You will do more than I have ever done—you and Olive Chancellor, because you are young and bright, brighter than I ever was; and besides, everything has got started."

"Well, you've got started, Miss Birdseye," Doctor Prance remarked, with raised eyebrows, protesting drily but kindly, and putting forward, with an air as if, after all, it didn't matter much, an authority that had been superseded. The manner in which this competent little woman indulged her patient showed sufficiently that the good lady was sinking fast.

"We will think of you always, and your name will be sacred to us, and that will teach us singleness and devotion," Verena went on, in the same tone, still not meeting Ransom's eyes again, and speaking as if she were trying now to stop herself, to tie herself by a vow.

"Well, it's the thing you and Olive have given your lives to that has absorbed me most, of late years. I did want to see justice done—to us. I haven't seen it, but you will. And Olive will. Where is she—why isn't she near me, to bid me farewell? And Mr. Ransom will—and he will be proud to have helped."

"Oh, mercy, mercy!" cried Verena, burying her head in Miss Birdseye's lap.

"You are not mistaken if you think I desire above all things that your weakness, your generosity, should be protected," Ransom said, rather ambiguously, but with pointed respectfulness. "I shall remember you as an example of what women are capable of," he added; and he had no subsequent compunctions for the speech, for he thought poor Miss Birdseye, for all her absence of profile, essentially feminine.

A kind of frantic moan from Olive Chancellor responded to these words, which had evidently struck her as an insolent sarcasm; and at the same moment Doctor Prance sent Ransom a glance which was an adjuration to depart.

"Good-by, Olive Chancellor," Miss Birdseye murmured. "I don't want to stay, though I should like to see what you will see."

"I shall see nothing but shame and ruin!" Olive shrieked, rushing across to her old friend, while Ransom discreetly quitted the scene.

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He met Doctor Prance in the village the next morning, and as soon as he looked at her he saw that the event which had been impending at Miss Chancellor's had taken place. It was not that her aspect was funereal; but it contained, somehow, an announcement that she had, for the present, no more thought to give to casting a line. Miss Birdseye had quietly passed away, in the evening, an hour or two after Ransom's visit. They had wheeled her chair into the house; there had been nothing to do but wait for complete extinction. Miss Chancellor and Miss Tarrant had sat by her there, without moving, each of her hands in theirs, and she had just melted away, toward eight o'clock. It was a lovely death; Doctor Prance intimated that she had never seen any that she thought more seasonable. She added that she was a good woman—one of the old sort; and that was the only funeral oration that Basil Ransom was destined to hear pronounced upon Miss Birdseye. The impression of the simplicity and humility of her end remained with him, and he reflected more than once, during the days that followed, that the absence of pomp and circumstance which had marked her career marked also the consecration of her memory. She had been almost celebrated, she had been active, earnest, ubiquitous beyond anyone else, she had given herself utterly to charities and creeds and causes; and yet the only persons, apparently, to whom her death made a real difference were three young women in a small "frame-house" on Cape Cod. Ransom learned from Doctor Prance that her mortal remains were to be committed to their rest in the little cemetery at Marmion, in sight of the pretty sea-view she loved to gaze at, among old mossy headstones of mariners and fisher-folk. She had seen the place when she first came down, when she was able to drive out a little, and she had said she thought it must be pleasant to lie there. It was not an injuction, a definite request; it had not occurred to Miss Birdseye, at the end of her days, to take an exacting line or to make, for the first time in eighty years, a personal claim. But Olive Chancellor and Verena had put their construction on her appreciation of the quietest corner of the striving, suffering world so weary a pilgrim of philanthropy had ever beheld.

In the course of the day Ransom received a note of five lines from Verena, the purport of which was to tell him that he must not expect to see her again for the present; she wished to be very quiet and think things over. She added the recommendation that he should leave the neighborhood for three or four days; there were plenty of strange old places to see in that part of the country. Ransom meditated deeply on this missive, and perceived that he should be guilty of very bad taste in not immediately absenting himself. He knew that to Olive Chancellor's vision his conduct already wore that stain, and it was useless, therefore, for him to consider how he could displease her either less or more. But he wished to convey to Verena the impression that he would do anything in the wide world to gratify *her* except give her up, and as he packed his valise he had an idea that he was both behaving beautifully and showing the finest diplomatic sense. To go away proved to himself how secure he felt, what a conviction he had that however she might turn and twist in his grasp he held her fast. The emotion she had expressed as he stood there before poor Miss Birdseye was only one of her instinctive contortions; he had taken due note of that—said to himself that a good many more would probably occur before she would be quiet. A woman that listens is lost, the old proverb says; and what had Verena done for the last three weeks but listen?—not very long each day, but with a degree of attention of which her not withdrawing from Marmion was the measure. She had not told him that Olive wanted to whisk her away, but he had not needed this confidence to know that if she stayed on the field it was because she preferred to. She probably had an idea she was fighting, but if she should fight no harder than she had fought up to now he should continue to take the same view of his success. She meant her request that he should go away for a few days as something combative; but, decidedly, he scarcely felt the blow. He liked to think that he had great tact with women, and he was sure Verena would be struck with this quality in reading, in the note he presently addressed her in reply to her own, that he had determined to take a little run to Provincetown. As there was no one under the rather ineffectual roof which sheltered him to whose hand he could intrust the billet—at the Marmion hotel one had to be one's own messenger—he walked to the village post office to request that his note should be put into Miss Chancellor's box. Here he met Doctor Prance, for a second time that day; she had come to deposit the letters by which Olive notified a few of Miss Birdseye's friends of the time and place of her obsequies. This young lady was shut up with Verena, and Doctor Prance was transacting all their business for them. Ransom felt that he made no admission that would impugn his estimate of the sex to which she in a manner belonged, in reflecting that she would acquit herself of these delegated duties with the greatest rapidity and accuracy. He told her he was going to absent himself for a few days, and expressed a friendly hope that he should find her at Marmion on his return.

Her keen eye gauged him a moment, to see if he were joking; then she said, "Well, I presume you think I can do as I like. But I can't."

"You mean you have got to go back to work?"

"Well, yes; my place is empty in the city."

"So is every other place. You had better remain till the end of the season."

"It's all one season to me. I want to see my office-slate. I wouldn't have stayed so long for anyone but her."

"Well, then, good-by," Ransom said. "I shall always remember our little expeditions. And I wish you every professional distinction."

"That's why I want to go back," Doctor Prance replied, with her flat, limited manner. He kept her a moment; he wanted to ask her about Verena. While he was hesitating how to form his question she remarked, evidently wishing to leave him a little memento of her sympathy, "Well, I hope you will be able to follow up your views."

"My views, Miss Prance? I am sure I have never mentioned them to you!" Then Ransom added, "How is Miss Tarrant today? is she more calm?"

"Oh no, she isn't calm at all," Doctor Prance answered, very definitely.

"Do you mean she's excited, emotional?"

"Well, she doesn't talk, she's perfectly still, and so is Miss Chancellor. They're as still as two watchers—they don't speak. But you can hear the silence vibrate."

"Vibrate?"

"Well, they are very nervous."

Ransom was confident, as I say, yet the effort that he made to extract a good omen from this characterization of the two ladies at the cottage was not altogether successful. He would have liked to ask Doctor Prance whether she didn't think he might count on Verena in the end; but he was too shy for this, the subject of his relations with Miss Tarrant never yet having been touched upon between them; and, besides, he didn't care to hear himself put a question which was more or less an implication of a doubt. So he compromised, with a sort of oblique and general inquiry about Olive; that might draw some light. "What do you think of Miss Chancellor—how does she strike you?"

Doctor Prance reflected a little, with an apparent consciousness that he meant more than he asked. "Well, she's losing flesh," she presently replied; and Ransom turned away, not encouraged, and feeling that, no doubt, the little doctress had better go back to her office-slate.

He did the thing handsomely, remained at Province-town a week, inhaling the delicious air, smoking innumerable cigars, and lounging among the ancient wharves, where the grass grew thick and the impression of fallen greatness was still stronger than at Marmion. Like his friends the Bostonians he was very nervous; there were days when he felt that he must rush back to the margin of that mild inlet; the voices of the air whispered to him that in his absence he was being outwitted. Nevertheless he stayed the time he had determined to stay; quieting himself with the reflection that there was nothing they could do to elude him unless, perhaps, they should start again for Europe, which they were not likely to do. If Miss Olive tried to hide Verena away in the United States he would undertake to find her—though he was obliged to confess that a flight to Europe would baffle him, owing to his want to cash for pursuit. Nothing, however, was less probable than that they would cross the Atlantic on the eve of Verena's projected *début* at the Music Hall. Before he went back to Marmion he wrote to this young lady, to announce his reappearance there and let her know that he expected she would come out to meet him the morning after. This conveyed the assurance that he intended to take as much of the day as he could get; he had had enough of the system of dragging through all the hours till a mere fraction of time was left before night, and he couldn't wait so long, at any rate, the day after his return. It was the afternoon-train that had brought him back from Provincetown, and in the evening he ascertained that the Bostonians had not deserted the field. There were lights in the windows of the house under the elms, and he stood where he had stood that evening with Doctor Prance and listened to the waves of Verena's voice, as she rehearsed her lecture. There were no waves this time, no sounds, and no sign of life but the lamps; the place had apparently not ceased to be given over to the conscious silence described by Doctor Prance. Ransom felt that he gave an immense proof of chivalry in not calling upon Verena to grant him an interview on the spot. She had not answered his last note, but the next day she kept the tryst, at the hour he had proposed; he saw her advance along the road, in a white dress, under a big parasol, and again he found himself liking immensely the way she walked. He was dismayed, however, at her face and what it portended; pale, with red eyes, graver than she had ever been before, she appeared to have spent the period of his absence in violent weeping. Yet that it was not for him she had been crying was proved by the very first words she spoke.

"I only came out to tell you definitely it's impossible! I have thought over everything, taking plenty of time—over and over; and that is my answer, finally, positively. You must take it—you shall have no other."

Basil Ransom gazed, frowning fearfully. "And why not, pray?"

"Because I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't!" she repeated, passionately, with her altered, distorted face.

"Damnation!" murmured the young man. He seized her hand, drew it into his arm, forcing her to walk with him along the road.

That afternoon Olive Chancellor came out of her house and wandered for a long time upon the shore. She looked up and down the bay, at the sails that gleamed on the blue water, shifting in the breeze and the light; they were a source of interest to her that they had never been before. It was a day she was destined never to forget; she felt it to be the saddest, the most wounding of her life. Unrest and haunting fear had not possession of her now, as they had held her in New York when Basil Ransom carried off Verena, to mark her for his own, in the park. But an immeasurable load of misery seemed to sit upon her soul; she ached with the bitterness of her melancholy, she was dumb and cold with despair. She had spent the violence of her terror, the eagerness of her grief, and now she was too weary to struggle with fate. She appeared to herself almost to have accepted it, as she wandered forth in the beautiful afternoon with the knowledge that the "ten minutes" which Verena had told her she meant to devote to Mr. Ransom that morning had developed suddenly into an embarkation for the day. They had gone out in a boat together; one of the village-worthies, from whom small craft were to be hired, had, at Verena's request, sent his little son to Miss Chancellor's cottage with that information. She had not understood whether they had taken the boatman with them. Even when the information came (and it came at a moment of considerable reassurance), Olive's nerves were not ploughed up by it as they had been, for instance, by the other expedition, in New York; and she could measure the distance she had traversed since then. It had not driven her away on the instant to pace the shore in frenzy, to challenge every boat that passed, and beg that the young lady who was sailing somewhere in the bay with a dark gentleman with long hair, should be entreated immediately to return. On the contrary, after the first quiver of pain inflicted by the news she had been able to occupy herself, to look after her house, to write her morning's letters, to go into her accounts, which she had had some time on her mind. She had wanted to put off thinking, for she knew to what hideous recognitions that would bring her round again. These were summed up in the fact that Verena was now not to be trusted for an hour. She had sworn to her the night before, with a face like a lacerated angel's, that her choice was made, that their union and their work were more to her than any other life could ever be, and that she deeply believed that should she forswear these holy things she should simply waste away, in the end, with remorse and shame. She would see Mr. Ransom just once more, for ten minutes, to utter one or two supreme truths to him, and then they would take up their old, happy, active, fruitful days again, would throw themselves more than ever into their splendid effort. Olive had seen how Verena was moved by Miss Birdseye's death, how at the sight of that unique woman's majestically simple withdrawal from a scene in which she had held every vulgar aspiration, every worldly standard and lure, so cheap, the girl had been touched again with the spirit of their most confident hours, had flamed up with the faith that no narrow personal joy could compare in sweetness with the idea of doing something for those who had always suffered and who waited still. This helped Olive to believe that she might begin to count upon her again, conscious as she was at the same time that Verena had been strangely weakened and strained by her odious ordeal. Oh, Olive knew that she loved him—knew what the passion was with which the wretched girl had to struggle; and she did her the justice to believe that her professions were sincere, her effort was real. Harassed and embittered as she was, Olive Chancellor still proposed to herself to be rigidly just, and that is why she pitied Verena now with an unspeakable pity, regarded her as the victim of an atrocious spell, and reserved all her execration and contempt for the author of their common misery. If Verena had stepped into a boat with him half an hour after declaring that she would give him his dismissal in twenty words, that was because he had ways, known to himself and other men, of creating situations without an issue, of forcing her to do things she could do only with sharp repugnance, under the menace of pain that would be sharper still. But all the same, what actually stared her in the face was that Verena was not to be trusted, even after rallying again as passionately as she had done during the days that followed Miss Birdseye's death. Olive would have liked to know the pang of penance that *she* would have been afraid, in her place, to incur; to see the locked door which *she* would not have managed to force open!

This inexpressibly mournful sense that, after all, Verena, in her exquisite delicacy and generosity, was appointed only to show how women had from the beginning of time been the sport of men's selfishness and avidity, this dismal conviction accompanied Olive on her walk, which lasted all the afternoon, and in which she found a kind of tragic relief. She went very far, keeping in the lonely places, unveiling her face to the splendid light, which seemed to make a mock of the darkness and bitterness of her spirit. There were little sandy coves, where the rocks were clean, where she made long stations, sinking down in them as if she hoped she should never rise again. It was the first time she had been out since Miss Birdseye's death, except the hour when, with the dozen sympathizers who came from Boston, she stood by the tired old woman's grave. Since then, for three days, she had been writing letters, narrating, describing to those who hadn't come; there were some, she thought, who might have managed to do so, instead of despatching her pages of diffuse reminiscence and asking her for all particulars in return. Selah Tarrant and his wife had come, obtrusively, as she thought, for they never had had very much intercourse with

Miss Birdseye; and if it was for Verena's sake, Verena was there to pay every tribute herself. Mrs. Tarrant had evidently hoped Miss Chancellor would ask her to stay on at Marmion, but Olive felt how little she was in a state for such heroics of hospitality. It was precisely in order that she should not have to do that sort of thing that she had given Selah such considerable sums, on two occasions, at a year's interval. If the Tarrants wanted a change of air they could travel all over the country—their present means permitted it; they could go to Saratoga or Newport if they liked. Their appearance showed that they could put their hands into their pockets (or into hers); at least Mrs. Tarrant's did. Selah still sported (on a hot day in August), his immemorial waterproof; but his wife rustled over the low tombstones at Marmion in garments of which (little as she was versed in such inquiries), Olive could see that the cost had been large. Besides, after Doctor Prance had gone (when all was over), she felt what a relief it was that Verena and she could be just together—together with the monstrous wedge of a question that had come up between them. That was company enough, great heaven! and she had not got rid of such an inmate as Doctor Prance only to put Mrs. Tarrant in her place.

Did Verena's strange aberration, on this particular day, suggest to Olive that it was no use striving, that the world was all a great trap or trick, of which women were ever the punctual dupes, so that it was the worst of the curse that rested upon them that they must most humiliate those who had most their cause at heart? Did she say to herself that their weakness was not only lamentable but hideous—hideous their predestined subjection to man's larger and grosser insistence? Did she ask herself why she should give up her life to save a sex which, after all, didn't wish to be saved, and which rejected the truth even after it had bathed them with its auroral light and they had pretended to be fed and fortified? These are mysteries into which I shall not attempt to enter, speculations with which I have no concern; it is sufficient for us to know that all human effort had never seemed to her so barren and thankless as on that fatal afternoon. Her eyes rested on the boats she saw in the distance, and she wondered if in one of them Verena were floating to her fate; but so far from straining forward to beckon her home she almost wished that she might glide away forever, that *she* might never see her again, never undergo the horrible details of a more deliberate separation. Olive lived over, in her miserable musings, her life for the last two years; she knew, again, how noble and beautiful her scheme had been, but how it had all rested on an illusion of which the very thought made her feel faint and sick. What was before her now was reality, with the beautiful, indifferent sky pouring down its complacent rays upon it. The reality was simply that Verena had been more to her than she ever was to Verena, and that, with her exquisite natural art, the girl had cared for their cause only because, for the time, no interest, no fascination, was greater. Her talent, the talent which was to achieve such wonders, was nothing to her; it was too easy, she could leave it alone, as she might close her piano, for months; it was only to Olive that it was everything. Verena had submitted, she had responded, she had lent herself to Olive's incitement and exhortation, because she was sympathetic and young and abundant and fanciful; but it had been a kind of hothouse loyalty, the mere contagion of example, and a sentiment springing up from within had easily breathed a chill upon it. Did Olive ask herself whether, for so many months, her companion had been only the most unconscious and most successful of humbugs? Here again I must plead a certain incompetence to give an answer. Positive it is that she spared herself none of the inductions of a reverie that seemed to dry up the mists and ambiguities of life. These hours of backward clearness come to all men and women, once at least, when they read the past in the light of the present, with the reasons of things, like unobserved finger-posts, protruding where they never saw them before. The journey behind them is mapped out and figured, with its false steps, its wrong observations, all its infatuated, deluded geography. They understand as Olive understood, but it is probable that they rarely suffer as she suffered. The sense of regret for her baffled calculations burned within her like a fire, and the splendor of the vision over which the curtain of mourning now was dropped brought to her eyes slow, still tears, tears that came one by one, neither easing her nerves nor lightening her load of pain. She thought of her innumerable talks with Verena, of the pledges they had exchanged, of their earnest studies, their faithful work, their certain reward, the winter nights under the lamp, when they thrilled with previsions as just and a passion as high as had ever found shelter in a pair of human hearts. The pity of it, the misery of such a fall after such a flight, could express itself only, as the poor girl prolonged the vague pauses of her unnoticed ramble, in a low, inarticulate murmur of anguish.

The afternoon waned, bringing with it the slight chill which, at the summer's end, begins to mark the shortening days. She turned her face homeward, and by this time became conscious that if Verena's companion had not yet brought her back there might be ground for uneasiness as to what had happened to them. It seemed to her that no sailboat could have put into the town without passing more or less before her eyes and showing her whom it carried; she had seen a dozen, freighted only with the figures of men. An accident was perfectly possible (what could Ransom, with his plantation habits, know about the management of a sail?), and once that danger loomed before her—the signal loveliness of the weather had prevented its striking her before—Olive's imagination hurried, with a bound, to the worst. She saw the boat overturned and drifting out to sea, and (after a week of nameless horror) the body of an unknown young woman, defaced beyond recognition, but with long auburn hair and in a white dress, washed up in some faraway cove. An hour before, her mind had rested with a sort of relief on the idea that Verena

should sink for ever beneath the horizon, so that their tremendous trouble might never be; but now, with the lateness of the hour, a sharp, immediate anxiety took the place of that intended resignation; and she quickened her step, with a heart that galloped too as she went. Then it was, above all, that she felt how *she* had understood friendship, and how never again to see the face of the creature she had taken to her soul would be for her as the stroke of blindness. The twilight had become thick by the time she reached Marmion and paused for an instant in front of her house, over which the elms that stood on the grassy wayside appeared to her to hang a blacker curtain than ever before.

There was no candle in any window, and when she pushed in and stood in the hall, listening a moment, her step awakened no answering sound. Her heart failed her; Verena's staying out in a boat from ten o'clock in the morning till nightfall was too unnatural, and she gave a cry, as she rushed into the low, dim parlor (darkened on one side, at that hour, by the wide-armed foliage, and on the other by the veranda and trellis), which expressed only a wild personal passion, a desire to take her friend in her arms again on any terms, even the most cruel to herself. The next moment she started back, with another and a different exclamation, for Verena was in the room, motionless, in a corner—the first place in which she had seated herself on reentering the house—looking at her with a silent face which seemed strange, unnatural, in the dusk. Olive stopped short, and for a minute the two women remained as they were, gazing at each other in the dimness. After that, too, Olive still said nothing; she only went to Verena and sat down beside her. She didn't know what to make of her manner; she had never been like that before. She was unwilling to speak; she seemed crushed and humbled. This was almost the worst—if anything could be worse than what had gone before; and Olive took her hand with an irresistible impulse of compassion and reassurance. From the way it lay in her own she guessed her whole feeling—saw it was a kind of shame, shame for her weakness, her swift surrender, her insane gyration, in the morning. Verena expressed it by no protest and no explanation; she appeared not even to wish to hear the sound of her own voice. Her silence itself was an appeal —an appeal to Olive to ask no questions (she could trust her to inflict no spoken reproach) ; only to wait till she could lift up her head again. Olive understood, or thought she understood, and the woefulness of it all only seemed the deeper. She would just sit there and hold her hand; that was all she could do; they were beyond each other's help in any other way now. Verena leaned her head back and closed her eyes, and for an hour, as nightfall settled in the room, neither of the young women spoke. Distinctly, it was a kind of shame. After a while the parlor-maid, very casual, in the manner of the servants at Marmion, appeared on the threshold with a lamp; but Olive motioned her frantically away. She wished to keep the darkness. It was a kind of shame.

The next morning Basil Ransom rapped loudly with his walking-stick on the lintel of Miss Chancellor's house-door, which, as usual on fine days, stood open. There was no need he should wait till the servant had answered his summons; for Olive, who had reason to believe he would come, and who had been lurking in the sitting room for a purpose of her own, stepped forth into the little hall.

"I am sorry to disturb you; I had the hope that—for a moment—I might see Miss Tarrant." That was the speech with which (and a measured salutation), he greeted his advancing kinswoman. She faced him an instant, and her strange green eyes caught the light.

"It's impossible. You may believe that when I say it."

"Why is it impossible?" he asked, smiling in spite of an inward displeasure. And as Olive gave him no answer, only gazing at him with a cold audacity which he had not hitherto observed in her, he added a little explanation. "It is simply to have seen her before I go—to have said five words to her. I want her to know that I have made up my mind—since yesterday—to leave this place; I shall take the train at noon."

It was not to gratify Olive Chancellor that he had determined to go away, or even that he told her this; yet he was surprised that his words brought no expression of pleasure to her face. "I don't think it is of much importance whether you go away or not. Miss Tarrant herself has gone away."

"Miss Tarrant—gone away?" This announcement was so much at variance with Verena's apparent intentions the night before that his ejaculation expressed chagrin as well as surprise, and in doing so it gave Olive a momentary advantage. It was the only one she had ever had, and the poor girl may be excused for having enjoyed it—so far as enjoyment was possible to her. Basil Ransom's visible discomfiture was more agreeable to her than anything had been for a long time.

"I went with her myself to the early train; and I saw it leave the station." And Olive kept her eyes unaverted, for the satisfaction of seeing how he took it.

It must be confessed that he took it rather ill. He had decided it was best he should retire, but Verena's retiring was another matter. "And where is she gone?" he asked, with a frown.

"I don't think I am obliged to tell you."

"Of course not! Excuse my asking. It is much better that I should find it out for myself, because if I owed the information to you I should perhaps feel a certain delicacy as regards profiting by it."

"Gracious heaven!" cried Miss Chancellor, at the idea of Ransom's delicacy. Then she added more deliberately: "You will not find out for yourself."

"You think not?"

"I am sure of it!" And her enjoyment of the situation becoming acute there broke from her lips a shrill,

unfamiliar, troubled sound, which performed the office of a laugh, a laugh of triumph, but which, at a distance, might have passed almost as well for a wail of despair. It rang in Ransom's ears as he quickly turned away.

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It was Mrs. Luna who received him, as she had received him on the occasion of his first visit to Charles Street; by which I do not mean quite in the same way. She had known very little about him then, but she knew too much for her happiness today, and she had with him now a little invidious, contemptuous manner, as if everything he should say or do could be a proof only of abominable duplicity and perversity. She had a theory that he had treated her shamefully; and he knew it—I do not mean the fact, but the theory: which led him to reflect that her resentments were as shallow as her opinions, inasmuch as if she really believed in her grievance, or if it had had any dignity, she would not have consented to see him. He had not presented himself at Miss Chancellor's door without a very good reason, and having done so he could not turn away so long as there was anyone in the house of whom he might have speech. He had sent up his name to Mrs. Luna, after being told that she was staying there, on the mere chance that she would see him; for he thought a refusal a very possible sequel to the letters she had written him during the past four or five months—letters he had scarcely read, full of allusions of the most cutting sort to proceedings of his, in the past, of which he had no recollection whatever. They bored him, for he had quite other matters in his mind.

"I don't wonder you have the bad taste, the crudity," she said, as soon as he came into the room, looking at him more sternly than he would have believed possible to her.

He saw that this was an allusion to his not having been to see her since the period of her sister's visit to New York; he having conceived for her, the evening of Mrs. Burrage's party, a sentiment of aversion which put an end to such attentions. He didn't laugh, he was too worried and preoccupied; but he replied, in a tone which apparently annoyed her as much as any indecent mirth: "I thought it very possible you wouldn't see me."

"Why shouldn't I see you, if I should take it into my head? Do you suppose I care whether I see you or not?"

"I supposed you wanted to, from your letters."

"Then why did you think I would refuse?"

"Because that's the sort of thing women do."

"Women—women! You know much about them!"

"I am learning something every day."

"You haven't learned yet, apparently, to answer their letters. It's rather a surprise to me that you don't pretend not to have received mine."

Ransom could smile now; the opportunity to vent the exasperation that had been consuming him almost restored his good humor. "What could I say? You overwhelmed me. Besides, I did answer one of them."

"One of them? You speak as if I had written you a dozen!" Mrs. Luna cried.

"I thought that was your contention—that you had done me the honor to address me so many. They were crushing, and when a man's crushed, it's all over."

"Yes, you look as if you were in very small pieces! I am glad I shall never see you again."

"I can see now why you received me—to tell me that," Ransom said.

"It is a kind of pleasure. I am going back to Europe."

"Really? for Newton's education?"

"Ah, I wonder you can have the face to speak of that—after the way you deserted him!"

"Let us abandon the subject, then, and I will tell you what I want."

"I don't in the least care what you want," Mrs. Luna remarked. "And you haven't even the grace to ask me where I am going—over there."

"What difference does that make to me—once you leave these shores?"

Mrs. Luna rose to her feet. "Ah, chivalry, chivalry!" she exclaimed. And she walked away to the window—one of the windows from which Ransom had first enjoyed, at Olive's solicitation, the view of the Back Bay. Mrs. Luna looked forth at it with little of the air of a person who was sorry to be about to lose it. "I am determined you shall know where I am going," she said in a moment. "I am going to Florence."

"Don't be afraid!" he replied. "I shall go to Rome."

"And you'll carry there more impertinence than has been seen there since the old emperors."

"Were the emperors impertinent, in addition to their other vices? I am determined, on my side, that you shall know what I have come for," Ransom said. "I wouldn't ask you if I could ask any one else; but I am very hard pressed, and I don't know who can help me."

Mrs. Luna turned on him a face of the frankest derision. "Help you? Do you remember the last time I asked you to help me?"

"That evening at Mrs. Burrage's? Surely I wasn't wanting then; I remember urging on your acceptance a chair, so that you might stand on it, to see and to hear."

"To see and to hear what, please? Your disgusting infatuation!"

"It's just about that I want to speak to you," Ransom pursued. "As you already know all about it, you have no new shock to receive, and I therefore venture to ask you——"

"Where tickets for her lecture tonight can be obtained? Is it possible she hasn't sent you one?"

"I assure you I didn't come to Boston to hear it," said Ransom, with a sadness which Mrs. Luna evidently regarded as a refinement of outrage. "What I should like to ascertain is where Miss Tarrant may be found at the present moment."

"And do you think that's a delicate inquiry to make of *me?"*

"I don't see why it shouldn't be, but I know you don't think it is, and that is why, as I say, I mention the matter to you only because I can imagine absolutely no one else who is in a position to assist me. I have been to the house of Miss Tarrant's parents, in Cambridge, but it is closed and empty, destitute of any sign of life. I went there first, on arriving this morning, and rang at this door only when my journey to Monadnoc Place had proved fruitless. Your sister's servant told me that Miss Tarrant was not staying here, but she added that Mrs. Luna was. No doubt you won't be pleased at having been spoken of as a sort of equivalent; and I didn't say to myself—or to the servant—that you would do as well; I only reflected that I could at least try you. I didn't even ask for Miss Chancellor, as I am sure she would give me no information whatever."

Mrs. Luna listened to this candid account of the young man's proceedings with her head turned a little over her shoulder at him, and her eyes fixed as unsympathetically as possible upon his own. "What you propose, then, as I understand it," she said in a moment, "is that I should betray my sister to you."

"Worse than that; I propose that you should betray Miss Tarrant herself."

"What do I care about Miss Tarrant? I don't know what you are talking about."

"Haven't you really any idea where she is living? Haven't you seen her here? Are Miss Olive and she not constantly together?"

Mrs. Luna, at this, turned full round upon him, and, with folded arms and her head tossed back, exclaimed: "Look here, Basil Ransom, I never thought you were a fool, but it strikes me that since we last met you have lost your wits!"

"There is no doubt of that," Ransom answered, smiling.

"Do you mean to tell me you don't know everything about Miss Tarrant that can be known?"

"I have neither seen her nor heard of her for the last ten weeks; Miss Chancellor has hidden her away."

"Hidden her away, with all the walls and fences of Boston flaming today with her name?"

"Oh yes, I have noticed that, and I have no doubt that by waiting till this evening I shall be able to see her. But I don't want to wait till this evening; I want to see her now, and not in public—in private."

"Do you indeed?—how interesting!" cried Mrs. Luna, with rippling laughter. "And pray what do you want to do with her?"

Ransom hesitated a little. "I think I would rather not tell you."

"Your charming frankness, then, has its limits! My poor cousin, you are really too *naïf.* Do you suppose it matters a straw to me?"

Ransom made no answer to this appeal, but after an instant he broke out: "Honestly, Mrs. Luna, can you give me no clue?"

"Lord, what terrible eyes you make, and what terrible words you use! 'Honestly,' quoth me! Do you think I am so fond of the creature that I want to keep her all to myself?"

"I don't know; I don't understand," said Ransom, slowly and softly, but still with his terrible eyes.

"And do you think I understand any better? You are not a very edifying young man," Mrs. Luna went on; "but I really think you have deserved a better fate than to be jilted and thrown over by a girl of that class."

"I haven't been jilted. I like her very much, but she never encouraged me."

At this Mrs. Luna broke again into articulate scoffing. "It is very odd that at your age you should be so little a man of the world!"

Ransom made her no other answer than to remark, thoughtfully and rather absently: "Your sister is really very clever."

"By which you mean, I suppose, that I am not!" Mrs. Luna suddenly changed her tone, and said, with the greatest sweetness and humility : "God knows, I have never pretended to be!"

Ransom looked at her a moment, and guessed the meaning of this altered note. It had suddenly come over her that with her portrait in half the shop-fronts, her advertisement on all the fences, and the great occasion on which she was to reveal herself to the country at large close at hand, Verena had become so conscious of high destinies that her dear friend's Southern kinsman really appeared to her very small game, and she might therefore be regarded as having cast him off. If this were the case, it would perhaps

be well for Mrs. Luna still to hold on. Basil's induction was very rapid, but it gave him time to decide that the best thing to say to his interlocutress was: "On what day do you sail for Europe?"

"Perhaps I shall not sail at all," Mrs. Luna replied, looking out of the window.

"And in that case—poor Newton's education?"

"I should try to content myself with a country which has given you yours."

"Don't you want him, then, to be a man of the world?"

"Ah, the world, the world!" she murmured, while she watched, in the deepening dusk, the lights of the town begin to reflect themselves in the Back Bay. "Has it been such a source of happiness to me that I belong to it?"

"Perhaps, after all, I shall be able to go to Florence!" said Ransom, laughing.

She faced him once more, this time slowly, and declared that she had never known anything so strange as his state of mind—she would be so glad to have an explanation of it. With the opinions he professed (it was for them she had liked him—she didn't like his character), why on earth should he be running after a little fifth-rate *poseuse,* and in such a frenzy to get hold of her? He might say it was none of her business, and of course she would have no answer to that; therefore she admitted that she asked simply out of intellectual curiosity, and because one always was tormented at the sight of a painful contradiction. With the things she had heard him say about his convictions and theories, his view of life and the great questions of the future, she should have thought he would find Miss Tarrant's attitudinizing absolutely nauseous. Were not her views the same as Olive's, and hadn't Olive and he signally failed to hit it off together? Mrs. Luna only asked because she was really quite puzzled. "Don't you know that some minds, when they see a mystery, can't rest till they clear it up?"

"You can't be more puzzled than I am," said Ransom. "Apparently the explanation is to be found in a sort of reversal of the formula you were so good, just now, as to apply to me. You like my opinions, but you entertain a different sentiment for my character. I deplore Miss Tarrant's opinions, but her character—well, her character pleases me."

Mrs. Luna stared, as if she were waiting, the explanation surely not being complete. "But as much as that?" she inquired.

"As much as what?" said Ransom, smiling. Then he added, "Your sister has beaten me."

"I thought she had beaten someone of late; she has seemed so gay and happy. I didn't suppose it was *all* because I was going away."

"Has she seemed very gay?" Ransom inquired, with a sinking of the heart. He wore such a long face, as he asked this question, that Mrs. Luna was again moved to audible mirth, after which she explained:

"Of course I mean gay for her. Everything is relative. With her impatience for this lecture of her friend's tonight, she's in an unspeakable state! She can't sit still for three minutes, she goes out fifteen times a day, and there has been enough arranging and interviewing, and discussing and telegraphing and advertising, enough wire-pulling and rushing about, to put an army in the field. What is it they are always doing to the armies in Europe?—mobilizing them? Well, Verena has been mobilized, and this has been headquarters."

"And shall you go to the Music Hall tonight?"

"For what do you take me? I have no desire to be shrieked at for an hour."

"No doubt, no doubt, Miss Olive must be in a state," Ransom went on, rather absently. Then he said, with abruptness, in a different tone: "If this house has been, as you say, headquarters, how comes it you haven't seen her?"

"Seen Olive? I have seen nothing else!"

"I mean Miss Tarrant. She must be somewhere—in the place—if she's to speak tonight."

"Should you like me to go out and look for her? *Il ne manquerait plus que cela!"* cried Mrs. Luna. "What's the matter with you, Basil Ransom, and what are you after?" she demanded, with considerable sharpness. She had tried haughtiness and she had tried humility, but they brought her equally face to face with a competitor whom she couldn't take seriously, yet who was none the less objectionable for that.

I know not whether Ransom would have attempted to answer her question had an obstacle not presented itself; at any rate, at the moment she spoke, the curtain in the doorway was pushed aside, and a visitor crossed the threshold. "Mercy! how provoking!" Mrs. Luna exclaimed, audibly enough; and without moving from her place she bent an uncharitable eye upon the invader, a gentleman whom Ransom had the sense of having met before. He was a young man with a fresh face and abundant locks, prematurely white; he stood smiling at Mrs. Luna, quite undaunted by the absence of any demonstration in his favor. She looked as if she didn't know him, while Ransom prepared to depart, leaving them to settle it together.

"I'm afraid you don't remember me, though I have seen you before," said the young man, very amiably. "I was here a week ago, and Miss Chancellor presented me to you."

"Oh yes; she's not at home now," Mrs. Luna returned, vaguely.

"So I was told—but I didn't let that prevent me." And the young man included Basil Ransom in the smile with which he made himself more welcome than Mrs. Luna appeared disposed to make him, and by which he seemed to call attention to his superiority. "There is a matter on which I want very much to obtain some information, and I have no doubt you will be so good as to give it to me."

"It comes back to me—you have something to do with the newspapers," said Mrs. Luna; and Ransom too, by this time, had placed the young man among his reminiscences. He had been at Miss Birdseye's famous party, and Doctor Prance had there described him as a brilliant journalist.

It was quite with the air of such a personage that he accepted Mrs. Luna's definition, and he continued to radiate toward Ransom (as if, in return, he remembered *his* face), while he dropped, confidentially, the word that expressed everything—" 'The Vesper,' don't you know?" Then he went on: "Now, Mrs. Luna, I don't care, I'm not going to let you off! We want the last news about Miss Verena, and it has got to come out of this house."

"Oh murder!" Ransom muttered, beneath his breath, taking up his hat.

"Miss Chancellor has hidden her away; I have been scouring the city in search of her, and her own father hasn't seen her for a week. We have got his ideas; they are very easy to get, but that isn't what we want."

"And what do you want?" Ransom was now impelled to inquire, as Mr. Pardon (even the name at present came back to him), appeared sufficiently to have introduced himself.

"We want to know how she feels about tonight; what report she makes of her nerves, her anticipations; how she looked, what she had on, up to six o'clock. Gracious! if I could see her I should know what I wanted, and so would she, I guess!" Mr. Pardon exclaimed. "You must know something, Mrs. Luna; it isn't natural you shouldn't. I won't inquire any further where she is, because that might seem a little pushing, if she does wish to withdraw herself—though I am bound to say I think she makes a mistake; we could work up these last hours for her! But can't you tell me any little personal items—the sort of thing the people like? What is she going to have for supper? or is she going to speak—a—without previous nourishment?"

"Really, sir, I don't know, and I don't in the least care; I have nothing to do with the business!" Mrs. Luna cried, angrily.

The reporter stared; then, eagerly, "You have nothing to do with it—you take an unfavorable view, you protest?" And he was already feeling in a side-pocket for his notebook.

"Mercy on us! are you going to put *that* in the paper?" Mrs. Luna exclaimed; and in spite of the sense, detestable to him, that everything he wished most to avert was fast closing over the girl, Ransom broke into cynical laughter.

"Ah, but do protest, madam; let us at least have that fragment!" Mr. Pardon went on. "A protest from this house would be a charming note. We *must* have it—we've got nothing else! The public are almost as much interested in your sister as they are in Miss Verena; they know to what extent she has backed her: and I should be so delighted (I see the heading, from here, so attractive!) just to take down 'What Miss Chancellor's Family Think about It!' "

Mrs. Luna sank into the nearest chair, with a groan, covering her face with her hands. "Heaven help me, I am glad I am going to Europe!"

"That is another little item—everything counts," said Matthias Pardon, making a rapid entry in his tablets. "May I inquire whether you are going to Europe in consequence of your disapproval of your sister's views?"

Mrs. Luna sprang up again, almost snatching the memoranda out of his hand. "If you have the impertinence to publish a word about me, or to mention my name in print, I will come to your office and make such a scene!"

"Dearest lady, that would be a godsend!" Mr. Pardon cried, enthusiastically; but he put his notebook back into his pocket.

"Have you made an exhaustive search for Miss Tarrant?" Basil Ransom asked of him. Mr. Pardon, at this inquiry, eyed him with a sudden, familiar archness, expressive of the idea of competition; so that Ransom added: "You needn't be afraid, I'm not a reporter."

"I didn't know but what you had come on from New York."

"So I have—but not as the representative of a newspaper."

"Fancy his taking you——" Mrs. Luna murmured, with indignation.

"Well, I have been everywhere I could think of," Mr. Pardon remarked. "I have been hunting round after your sister's agent, but I haven't been able to catch up with him; I suppose he has been hunting on his side. Miss Chancellor told me—Mrs. Luna may remember it—that she shouldn't be here at all during the week, and that she preferred not to tell me either where or how she was to spend her time until the momentous evening. Of course I let her know that I should find out if I could, and you may remember," he said to Mrs. Luna, "the conversation we had on the subject. I remarked, candidly, that if they didn't look out they would overdo the quietness. Doctor Tarrant has felt very low about it. However, I have done what I could with the material at my command, and the 'Vesper' has let the public know that her whereabouts was the biggest mystery of the season. It's difficult to get round the 'Vesper.' "

"I am almost afraid to open my lips in your presence." Mrs. Luna broke in, "but I must say that I think my sister was strangely communicative. She told you ever so much that I wouldn't have breathed."

"I should like to try you with something you know!" Matthias Pardon returned, imperturbably. "This isn't a fair trial, because you don't know. Miss Chancellor came round —came round considerably, there's

no doubt of that; because a year or two ago she was terribly unapproachable. If I have mollified her, madam, why shouldn't I mollify you? She realizes that I can help her now, and as I ain't rancorous I am willing to help her all she'll let me. The trouble is, she won't let me enough, yet; it seems as if she couldn't believe it of me. At any rate," he pursued, addressing himself more particularly to Ransom, "half an hour ago, at the Hall, they knew nothing whatever about Miss Tarrant, beyond the fact that about a month ago she came there, with Miss Chancellor, to try her voice, which rang all over the place, like silver, and that Miss Chancellor guaranteed her absolute punctuality tonight."

"Well, that's all that is required," said Ransom, at hazard; and he put out his hand, in farewell, to Mrs. Luna.

"Do you desert me already?" she demanded, giving him a glance which would have embarrassed any spectator but a reporter of the "Vesper."

"I have fifty things to do; you must excuse me." He was nervous, restless, his heart was beating much faster than usual; he couldn't stand still, and he had no compunction whatever about leaving her to get rid, by herself, of Mr. Pardon.

This gentleman continued to mix in the conversation, possibly from the hope that if he should linger either Miss Tarrant or Miss Chancellor would make her appearance. "Every seat in the Hall is sold; the crowd is expected to be immense. When our Boston public *does* take an idea!" Mr. Pardon exclaimed.

Ransom only wanted to get away, and in order to facilitate his release by implying that in such a case he should see her again, he said to Mrs. Luna, rather hypocritically, from the threshold, "You had really better come tonight."

"I am not like the Boston public—I don't take an idea!" she replied.

"Do you mean to say you are not going?" cried Mr. Pardon, with widely open eyes, clapping his hand again to his pocket. "Don't you regard her as a wonderful genius?"

Mrs. Luna was sorely tried, and the vexation of seeing Ransom slip away from her with his thoughts visibly on Verena, leaving her face to face with the odious newspaperman, whose presence made passionate protest impossible—the annoyance of seeing everything and everyone mock at her and fail to compensate her was such that she lost her head, while rashness leaped to her lips and jerked out the answer—"No indeed; I think her a vulgar idiot!"

"Ah, madam, I should never permit myself to print that!" Ransom heard Mr. Pardon rejoin, reproachfully, as he dropped the *portière* of the drawing room.

He walked about for the next two hours, walked all over Boston, heedless of his course, and conscious only of an unwillingness to return to his hotel and an inability to eat his dinner or rest his weary legs. He had been roaming in very much the same desperate fashion, at once eager and purposeless, for many days before he left New York, and he knew that his agitation and suspense must wear themselves out. At present they pressed him more than ever; they had become tremendously acute. The early dusk of the last half of November had gathered thick, but the evening was fine and the lighted streets had the animation and variety of a winter that had begun with brilliancy. The shop-fronts glowed through frosty panes, the passers bustled on the pavement, the bells of the streetcars jangled in the cold air, the newsboys hawked the evening-papers, the vestibules of the theatres, illuminated and flanked with colored posters and the photographs of actresses, exhibited seductively their swinging doors of red leather or baize, spotted with little brass nails. Behind great plates of glass the interior of the hotels became visible, with marble-paved lobbies, white with electric lamps, and columns, and Westerners on divans stretching their legs, while behind a counter, set apart and covered with an array of periodicals and novels in paper covers, little boys, with the faces of old men, showing plans of the playhouses and offering librettos, sold orchestra-chairs at a premium. When from time to time Ransom paused at a corner, hesitating which way to drift, he looked up and saw the stars, sharp and near, scintillating over the town. Boston seemed to him big and full of nocturnal life, very much awake and preparing for an evening of pleasure.

He passed and repassed the Music Hall, saw Verena immensely advertised, gazed down the vista, the approach for pedestrians, which leads out of School Street, and thought it looked expectant and ominous. People had not begun to enter yet, but the place was ready, lighted and open, and the interval would be only too short. So it appeared to Ransom, while at the same time he wished immensely the crisis were over. Everything that surrounded him referred itself to the idea with which his mind was palpitating, the question whether he might not still intervene as against the girl's jump into the abyss. He believed that all Boston was going to hear her, or that at least everyone was whom he saw in the streets; and there was a kind of incentive and inspiration in this thought. The vision of wresting her from the mighty multitude set him off again, to stride through the population that would fight for her. It was not too late, for he felt strong; it would not be too late even if she should already stand there before thousands of converging eyes. He had had his ticket since the morning, and now the time was going on. He went back to his hotel at last for ten minutes, and refreshed himself by dressing a little and by drinking a glass of wine. Then he took his way once more to the Music Hall, and saw that people were beginning to go in—the first drops of the great stream, among whom there were many women. Since seven o'clock the minutes had moved fast —before that they had dragged—and now there was only half an hour. Ransom passed in with the others; he knew just where his seat was; he had chosen it, on reaching Boston, from the few that were left, with what he believed to be care. But now, as he stood beneath the faraway paneled roof, stretching above the line of little tongues of flame which marked its junction with the walls, he felt that this didn't matter much, since he certainly was not going to subside into his place. He was not one of the audience; he was apart, unique, and had come on a business altogether special. It wouldn't have mattered if, in advance, he had got no place at all and had just left himself to pay for standing-room at the last. The people came pouring in, and in a very short time there would only be standing-room left. Ransom had no definite plan; he had mainly wanted to get inside of the building, so that, on a view of the field, he might make up his mind. He had never been in the Music Hall before, and its lofty vaults and rows of overhanging balconies made it to his imagination immense and impressive. There were two or three moments during which he felt as he could imagine a young man to feel who, waiting in a public place, has made up his mind, for reasons of his own, to discharge a pistol at the king or the president.

The place struck him with a kind of Roman vastness; the doors which opened out of the upper balconies, high aloft, and which were constantly swinging to and fro with the passage of spectators and ushers, reminded him of the *vomitoria* that he had read about in descriptions of the Colosseum. The huge organ, the background of the stage —a stage occupied with tiers of seats for choruses and civic worthies— lifted to the dome its shining pipes and sculptured pinnacles, and some genius of music or oratory erected himself in monumental bronze at the base. The hall was so capacious and serious, and the audience increased so rapidly without filling it, giving Ransom a sense of the numbers it would contain when it was packed, that the courage of the two young women, face to face with so tremendous an ordeal, hovered before him as really sublime, especially the conscious tension of poor Olive, who would have been spared none of the anxieties and tremors, none of the previsions of accident or calculations of failure. In the front

of the stage was a slim, high desk, like a music-stand, with a cover of red velvet, and near it was a light ornamental chair, on which he was sure Verena would not seat herself, though he could fancy her leaning at moments on the back. Behind this was a kind of semicircle of a dozen armchairs, which had evidently been arranged for the friends of the speaker, her sponsors and patrons. The hall was more and more full of premonitory sounds; people making a noise as they unfolded, on hinges, their seats, and itinerant boys, whose voices as they cried out "Photographs of Miss Tarrant —sketch of her life!" or "Portraits of the Speaker—story of her career!" sounded small and piping in the general immensity. Before Ransom was aware of it several of the armchairs, in the row behind the lecturer's desk, were occupied, with gaps, and in a moment he recognized, even across the interval, three of the persons who had appeared. The straight-featured woman with bands of glossy hair and eyebrows that told at a distance, could only be Mrs. Farrinder, just as the gentleman beside her, in a white overcoat, with an umbrella and a vague face, was probably her husband Amariah. At the opposite end of the row were another pair, whom Ransom, unacquainted with certain chapters of Verena's history, perceived without surprise to be Mrs. Burrage and her insinuating son. Apparently their interest in Miss Tarrant was more than a momentary fad, since—like himself—they had made the journey from New York to hear her. There were other figures, unknown to our young man, here and there, in the semicircle; but several places were still empty (one of which was of course reserved for Olive), and it occurred to Ransom, even in his preoccupation, that one of them ought to remain so—ought to be left to symbolize the presence, in the spirit, of Miss Birdseye.

He bought one of the photographs of Verena, and thought it shockingly bad, and bought also the sketch of her life, which many people seemed to be reading, but crumpled it up in his pocket for future consideration. Verena was not in the least present to him in connection with this exhibition of enterprise and puffery; what he saw was Olive, struggling and yielding, making every sacrifice of taste for the sake of the largest hearing, and conforming herself to a great popular system. Whether she had struggled or not, there was a catchpenny effect about the whole thing which added to the fever in his cheek and made him wish he had money to buy up the stock of the vociferous little boys. Suddenly the notes of the organ rolled out into the hall, and he became aware that the overture or prelude had begun. This, too, seemed to him a piece of claptrap, but he didn't wait to think of it; he instantly edged out of his place, which he had chosen near the end of a row, and reached one of the numerous doors. If he had had no definite plan he now had at least an irresistible impulse, and he felt the prick of shame at having faltered for a moment. It had been his tacit calculation that Verena, still enshrined in mystery by her companion, would not have reached the scene of her performance till within a few minutes of the time at which she was to come forth; so that he had lost nothing by waiting, up to this moment, before the platform. But now he must overtake his opportunity. Before passing out of the hall into the lobby he paused, and with his back to the stage, gave a look at the gathered auditory. It had become densely numerous, and, suffused with the evenly distributed gaslight, which fell from a great elevation, and the thick atmosphere that hangs forever in such places, it appeared to pile itself high and to look dimly expectant and formidable. He had a throb of uneasiness at his private purpose of balking it of its entertainment, its victim—a glimpse of the ferocity that lurks in a disappointed mob. But the thought of that danger only made him pass more quickly through the ugly corridors; he felt that his plan was definite enough now, and he found that he had no need even of asking the way to a certain small door (one or more of them), which he meant to push open. In taking his place in the morning he had assured himself as to the side of the house on which (with its approach to the platform), the withdrawing room of singers and speakers was situated; he had chosen his seat in that quarter, and he now had not far to go before he reached it. No one heeded or challenged him; Miss Tarrant's auditors were still pouring in (the occasion was evidently to have been an unprecedented success of curiosity), and had all the attention of the ushers. Ransom opened a door at the end of a passage, and it admitted him into a sort of vestibule, quite bare save that at a second door, opposite to him, stood a figure at the sight of which he paused for a moment in his advance.

The figure was simply that of a robust policeman, in his helmet and brass buttons—a policeman who was expecting him—Ransom could see that in a twinkling. He judged in the same space of time that Olive Chancellor had heard of his having arrived and had applied for the protection of this functionary, who was now simply guarding the ingress and was prepared to defend it against all comers. There was a slight element of surprise in this, as he had reasoned that his nervous kinswoman was absent from her house for the day—had been spending it all in Verena's retreat, wherever that was. The surprise was not great enough, however, to interrupt his course for more than an instant, and he crossed the room and stood before the belted sentinel. For a moment neither spoke; they looked at each other very hard in the eyes, and Ransom heard the organ, beyond partitions, launching its waves of sound through the hall. They seemed to be very near it, and the whole place vibrated. The policeman was a tall, lean-faced, sallow man, with a stoop of the shoulders, a small, steady eye, and something in his mouth which made a protuberance in his cheek. Ransom could see that he was very strong, but he believed that he himself was not materially less so. However, he had not come there to show physical fight—a public tussle about Verena was not an attractive idea, except perhaps, after all, if he should get the worst of it, from the point of view of Olive's new system of advertising; and, moreover, it would not be in the least necessary. Still he said nothing, and

still the policeman remained dumb, and there was something in the way the moments elapsed and in our young man's consciousness that Verena was separated from him only by a couple of thin planks, which made him feel that she too expected him, but in another sense; that she had nothing to do with this parade of resistance, that she would know in a moment, by quick intuition, that he was there, and that she was only praying to be rescued, to be saved. Face to face with Olive she hadn't the courage, but she would have it with her hand in his. It came to him that there was no one in the world less sure of her business just at that moment than Olive Chancellor; it was as if he could see, through the door, the terrible way her eyes fixed on Verena while she held her watch in her hand and Verena looked away from her. Olive would have been so thankful that she should begin before the hour, but of course that was impossible. Ransom asked no questions —that seemed a waste of time; he only said, after a minute, to the policeman:

"I should like very much to see Miss Tarrant, if you will be so good as to take in my card."

The guardian of order, well planted just between him and the handle of the door, took from Ransom the morsel of pasteboard which he held out to him, read slowly the name inscribed on it, turned it over and looked at the back, then returned it to his interlocutor. "Well, I guess it ain't much use," he remarked.

"How can you know that? You have no business to decline my request."

"Well, I guess I have about as much business as you have to make it." Then he added, "You are just the very man she wants to keep out."

"I don't think Miss Tarrant wants to keep me out," Ransom returned.

"I don't know much about her, she hasn't hired the hall. It's the other one—Miss Chancellor; it's her that runs this lecture."

"And she has asked you to keep me out? How absurd!" exclaimed Ransom, ingeniously.

"She tells me you're none too fit to be round alone; you have got this thing on the brain. I guess you'd better be quiet," said the policeman.

"Quiet? Is it possible to be more quiet than I am?"

"Well, I've seen crazy folks that were a good deal like you. If you want to see the speaker why don't you go and set round in the hall, with the rest of the public?" And the policeman waited, in an immovable, ruminating, reasonable manner, for an answer to this inquiry.

Ransom had one, on the instant, at his service. "Because I don't want simply to see her; I want also to speak to her —in private."

"Yes—it's always intensely private," said the policeman. "Now I wouldnt lose the lecture if I was you. I guess it will do you good."

"The lecture?" Ransom repeated, laughing. "It won't take place."

"Yes it will—as quick as the organ stops." Then the policeman added, as to himself, "Why the devil don't it?"

"Because Miss Tarrant has sent up to the organist to tell him to keep on."

"Who has she sent, do you s'pose?" And Ransom's new acquaintance entered into his humor. "I guess Miss Chancellor isn't her nigger.

"She has sent her father, or perhaps even her mother. They are in there too."

"How do you know that?" asked the policeman, consideringly.

"Oh, I know everything," Ransom answered, smiling.

"Well, I guess they didn't come here to listen to that organ. We'll hear something else before long, if he doesn't stop."

"You will hear a good deal, very soon," Ransom remarked.

The serenity of his self-confidence appeared at last to make an impression on his antagonist, who lowered his head a little, like some butting animal, and looked at the young man from beneath bushy eyebrows. "Well, I *have* heard a good deal, since I've been in Boston."

"Oh, Boston's a great place," Ransom rejoined, inattentively. He was not listening to the policeman or to the organ now, for the sound of voices had reached him from the other side of the door. The policeman took no further notice of it than to lean back against the panels, with folded arms; and there was another pause, between them, during which the playing of the organ ceased.

"I will just wait here, with your permission," said Ransom, "and presently I shall be called."

"Who do you s'pose will call you?"

"Well, Miss Tarrant, I hope."

"She'll have to square the other one first."

Ransom took out his watch, which he had adapted, on purpose, several hours before, to Boston time, and saw that the minutes had sped with increasing velocity during this interview, and that it now marked five minutes past eight. "Miss Chancellor will have to square the public," he said in a moment; and the words were far from being an empty profession of security, for the conviction already in possession of him, that a drama in which he, though cut off, was an actor, had been going on for some time in the apartment he was prevented from entering, that the situation was extraordinarily strained there, and that it could not come to an end without an appeal to him—this transcendental assumption acquired an infinitely greater force the instant he perceived that Verena was even now keeping her audience waiting. Why didn't she go

on? Why, except that she knew he was there, and was gaining time?

"Well, I guess she has shown herself," said the doorkeeper, whose discussion with Ransom now appeared to have passed, on his own part, and without the slightest prejudice to his firmness, into a sociable, gossiping phase.

"If she had shown herself, we should hear the reception, the applause."

"Well, there they air; they are going to give it to her," the policeman announced.

He had an odious appearance of being in the right, for there indeed they seemed to be—they were giving it to her. A general hubbub rose from the floor and the galleries of the hall—the sound of several thousand people stamping with their feet and rapping with their umbrellas and sticks. Ransom felt faint, and for a little while he stood with his gaze interlocked with that of the policeman. Then suddenly a wave of coolness seemed to break over him, and he exclaimed: "My dear fellow, that isn't applause—it's impatience. It isn't a reception, it's a call!"

The policeman neither assented to this proposition nor denied it; he only transferred the protuberance in his cheek to the other side, and observed:

"I guess she's sick."

"Oh, I hope not!" said Ransom, very gently. The stamping and rapping swelled and swelled for a minute, and then it subsided; but before it had done so Ransom's definition of it had plainly become the true one. The tone of the manifestation was good-humored, but it was not gratulatory. He looked at his watch again, and saw that five minutes more had elapsed, and he remembered what the newspaperman in Charles Street had said about Olive's guaranteeing Verena's punctuality. Oddly enough, at the moment the image of this gentleman recurred to him, the gentleman himself burst through the other door, in a state of the liveliest agitation.

"Why in the name of goodness don't she go on? If she wants to make them call her, they've done it about enough!" Mr. Pardon turned, pressingly, from Ransom to the policeman and back again, and in his preoccupation gave no sign of having met the Mississippian before.

"I guess she's sick," said the policeman.

"The public'll be sick!" cried the distressed reporter. "If she's sick, why doesn't she send for a doctor? All Boston is packed into this house, and she has got to talk to it. I want to go in and see."

"You can't go in," said the policeman, drily.

"Why can't I go in, I should like to know? I want to go in for the 'Vesper'!"

"You can't go in for anything. I'm keeping this man out, too," the policeman added genially, as if to make Mr. Pardon's exclusion appear less invidious.

"Why, they'd ought to let *you* in," said Matthias, staring a moment at Ransom.

"Maybe they'd ought, but they won't," the policeman remarked.

"Gracious me!" panted Mr. Pardon; "I knew from the first Miss Chancellor would make a mess of it! Where's Mr. Filer?" he went on, eagerly, addressing himself apparently to either of the others, or to both.

"I guess he's at the door, counting the money," said the policeman.

"Well, he'll have to give it back if he don't look out!"

"Maybe he will. I'll let *him* in if he comes, but he's the only one. She is on now," the policeman added, without emotion.

His ear had caught the first faint murmur of another explosion of sound. This time, unmistakably, it was applause—the clapping of multitudinous hands, mingled with the noise of many throats. The demonstration, however, though considerable, was not what might have been expected, and it died away quickly. Mr. Pardon stood listening, with an expression of some alarm. "Merciful fathers! can't they give her more than that?" he cried. "I'll just fly round and see!"

When he had hurried away again, Ransom said to the policeman—"Who is Mr. Filer?"

"Oh, he's an old friend of mine. He's the man that runs Miss Chancellor."

"That runs her?"

"Just the same as she runs Miss Tarrant. He runs the pair, as you might say. He's in the lecture-business."

"Then he had better talk to the public himself."

"Oh, *he* can't talk; he can only boss!"

The opposite door at this moment was pushed open again, and a large, heated-looking man, with a little stiff beard on the end of his chin and his overcoat flying behind him, strode forward with an imprecation. "What the h——are they doing in the parlor? This sort of thing's about played out!"

"Ain't she up there now?" the policeman asked.

"It's not Miss Tarrant," Ransom said, as if he knew all about it. He perceived in a moment that this was Mr. Filer, Olive Chancellor's agent; an inference instantly followed by the reflection that such a personage would have been warned against him by his kinswoman and would doubtless attempt to hold him, or his influence, accountable for Verena's unexpected delay. Mr. Filer only glanced at him, however, and to Ransom's surprise appeared to have no theory of his identity; a fact implying that Miss Chancellor had considered that the greater discretion was (except to the policeman) to hold her tongue about him

altogether.

"Up there? It's her jackass of a father that's up there!" cried Mr. Filer, with his hand on the latch of the door, which the policeman had allowed him to approach.

"Is he asking for a doctor?" the latter inquired, dispassionately.

"You're the sort of doctor he'll want, if he doesn't produce the girl! You don't mean to say they've locked themselves in? What the plague are they after?"

"They've got the key on that side," said the policeman, while Mr. Filer discharged at the door a volley of sharp knocks, at the same time violently shaking the handle.

"If the door was locked, what was the good of your standing before it?" Ransom inquired.

"So as you couldn't do that"; and the policeman nodded at Mr. Filer.

"You see your interference has done very little good."

"I dunno; she has got to come out yet."

Mr. Filer meanwhile had continued to thump and shake, demanding instant admission and inquiring if they were going to let the audience pull the house down. Another round of applause had broken out, directed perceptibly to some apology, some solemn circumlocution, of Selah Tarrant's; this covered the sound of the agent's voice, as well as that of a confused and divided response, proceeding from the parlor. For a minute nothing definite was audible; the door remained closed, and Matthias Pardon reappeared in the vestibule.

"He says she's just a little faint—from nervousness. She'll be all ready in about three minutes." This announcement was Mr. Pardon's contribution to the crisis; and he added that the crowd was a lovely crowd, it was a real Boston crowd, it was perfectly good-humored.

"There's a lovely crowd, and a real Boston one too, I guess, in here!" cried Mr. Filer, now banging very hard. "I've handled prima donnas, and I've handled natural curiosities, but I've never seen anything up to this. Mind what I say, ladies; if you don't let me in, I'll smash down the door!"

"Don't seem as if *you* could make it much worse, does it?" the policeman observed to Ransom, strolling aside a little, with the air of being superseded.

Ransom made no reply; he was watching the door, which at that moment gave way from within. Verena stood there —it was she, evidently, who had opened it—and her eyes went straight to his. She was dressed in white, and her face was whiter than her garment; above it her hair seemed to shine like fire. She took a step forward; but before she could take another he had come down to her, on the threshold of the room. Her face was full of suffering, and he did not attempt—before all those eyes—to take her hand; he only said in a low tone, "I have been waiting for you—a long time!"

"I know it—I saw you in your seat—I want to speak to you."

"Well, Miss Tarrant, don't you think you'd better be on the platform?" cried Mr. Filer, making with both his arms a movement as if to sweep her before him, through the waiting room, up into the presence of the public.

"In a moment I shall be ready. My father is making that all right." And, to Ransom's surprise, she smiled, with all her sweetness, at the irrepressible agent; appeared to wish genuinely to reassure him.

The three had moved together into the waiting room, and there at the farther end of it, beyond the vulgar, perfunctory chairs and tables, under the flaring gas, he saw Mrs. Tarrant sitting upright on a sofa, with immense rigidity, and a large flushed visage, full of suppressed distortion, and beside her prostrate, fallen over, her head buried in the lap of Verena's mother, the tragic figure of Olive Chancellor. Ransom could scarcely know how much Olive's having flung herself upon Mrs. Tarrant's bosom testified to the convulsive scene that had just taken place behind the locked door. He closed it again, sharply, in the face of the reporter and the policeman, and at the same moment Selah Tarrant descended, through the aperture leading to the platform, from his brief communion with the public. On seeing Ransom he stopped short, and, gathering his waterproof about him, measured the young man from head to foot.

"Well, sir, perhaps *you* would like to go and explain our hitch," he remarked, indulging in a smile so comprehensive that the corners of his mouth seemed almost to meet behind. "I presume that you, better than anyone else, can give them an insight into our difficulties!"

"Father, be still; father, it will come out all right in a moment!" cried Verena, below her breath, panting like an emergent diver.

"There's one thing I want to know: are we going to spend half an hour talking over our domestic affairs?" Mr. Filer demanded, wiping his indignant countenance. "Is Miss Tarrant going to lecture, or ain't she going to lecture? If she ain't, she'll please to show cause why. Is she aware that every quarter of a second, at the present instant, is worth about five hundred dollars?"

"I know that—I know that, Mr. Filer; I will begin in a moment!" Verena went on. "I only want to speak to Mr. Ransom—just three words. They are perfectly quiet—don't you see how quiet they are? They trust me, they trust me, don't they, father? I only want to speak to Mr. Ransom."

"Who the devil is Mr. Ransom?" cried the exasperated, bewildered Filer.

Verena spoke to the others, but she looked at her lover, and the expression of her eyes was ineffably touching and beseeching. She trembled with nervous passion, there were sobs and supplications in her voice, and Ransom felt himself flushing with pure pity for her pain—her inevitable agony. But at the same moment he had another perception, which brushed aside remorse; he saw that he could do what he wanted, that she begged him, with all her being, to spare her, but that so long as he should protest she was submissive, helpless. What he wanted, in this light, flamed before him and challenged all his manhood, tossing his determination to a height from which not only Doctor Tarrant, and Mr. Filer, and Olive, over there, in her sightless, soundless shame, but the great expectant hall as well, and the mighty multitude, in suspense, keeping quiet from minute to minute and holding the breath of its anger—from which all these things looked small, surmountable, and of the moment only. He didn't quite understand, as yet, however; he saw that Verena had not refused, but temporized, that the spell upon her—thanks to which he shóuld still be able to rescue her—had been the knowledge that he was near.

"Come away, come away," he murmured, quickly, putting out his two hands to her.

She took one of them, as if to plead, not to consent. "Oh, let me off, let me off—for *her,* for the others! It's too terrible, it's impossible!"

"What I want to know is why Mr. Ransom isn't in the hands of the police!" wailed Mrs. Tarrant, from her sofa.

"I have been, madam, for the last quarter of an hour." Ransom felt more and more that he could manage it, if he only kept cool. He bent over Verena with a tenderness in which he was careless, now, of observation. "Dearest, I told you, I warned you. I left you alone for ten weeks; but could that make you

doubt it was coming? Not for worlds, not for millions, shall you give yourself to that roaring crowd. Don't ask me to care for them, or for anyone! What do they care for you but to gape and grin and babble? You are mine, you are not theirs."

"What under the sun is the man talking about? With the most magnificent audience ever brought together! The city of Boston is under this roof!" Mr. Filer gaspingly interposed.

"The city of Boston be damned!" said Ransom.

"Mr. Ransom is very much interested in my daughter. He doesn't approve of our views," Selah Tarrant explained.

"It's the most horrible, wicked, immoral selfishness I ever heard in my life!" roared Mrs. Tarrant.

"Selfishness! Mrs. Tarrant, do you suppose I pretend not to be selfish?"

"Do you want us all murdered by the mob, then?"

"They can have their money—can't you give them back their money?" cried Verena, turning frantically round the circle.

"Verena Tarrant, you don't mean to say you are going to back down?" her mother shrieked.

"Good God! that I should make her suffer like this!" said Ransom to himself; and to put an end to the odious scene he would have seized Verena in his arms and broken away into the outer world, if Olive, who at Mrs. Tarrant's last loud challenge had sprung to her feet, had not at the same time thrown herself between them with a force which made the girl relinquish her grasp of Ransom's hand. To his astonishment, the eyes that looked at him out of her scared, haggard face were, like Verena's, eyes of tremendous entreaty. There was a moment during which she would have been ready to go down on her knees to him, in order that the lecture should go on.

"If you don't agree with her, take her up on the platform, and have it out there; the public would like that, first-rate!" Mr. Filer said to Ransom, as if he thought this suggestion practical.

"She had prepared a lovely address!" Selah remarked, mournfully, as if to the company in general.

No one appeared to heed the observation, but his wife broke out again. "Verena Tarrant, I should like to slap you! Do you call such a man as that a gentleman? I don't know where your father's spirit is, to let him stay!"

Olive, meanwhile, was literally praying to her kinsman. "Let her appear this once, just this once: not to ruin, not to shame! Haven't you any pity; do you want me to be hooted? It's only for an hour. Haven't you any soul?"

Her face and voice were terrible to Ransom; she had flung herself upon Verena and was holding her close, and he could see that her friend's suffering was faint in comparison to her own. "Why for an hour, when it's all false and damnable? An hour is as bad as ten years! She's mine or she isn't, and if she's mine, she's all mine!"

"Yours! Yours! Verena, think, think what you're doing!" Olive moaned, bending over her.

Mr. Filer was now pouring forth his nature in objurgations and oaths, and brandishing before the culprits—Verena and Ransom—the extreme penalty of the law. Mrs. Tarrant had burst into violent hysterics, while Selah revolved vaguely about the room and declared that it seemed as if the better day was going to be put off for quite a while. "Don't you see how good, how sweet they are—giving us all this time? Don't you think that when they behave like that—without a sound, for five minutes—they ought to be rewarded?" Verena asked, smiling divinely, at Ransom. Nothing could have been more tender, more exquisite, than the way she put her appeal upon the ground of simple charity, kindness to the great good-natured, childish public.

"Miss Chancellor may reward them in any way she likes. Give them back their money and a little present to each."

"Money and presents? I should like to shoot you, sir!" yelled Mr. Filer. The audience had really been very patient, and up to this point deserved Verena's praise; but it was now Iong past eight o'clock, and symptoms of irritation—cries and groans and hisses—began again to proceed from the hall. Mr. Filer launched himself into the passage leading to the stage, and Selah rushed after him. Mrs. Tarrant extended herself, sobbing, on the sofa, and Olive, quivering in the storm, inquired of Ransom what he wanted her to do, what humiliation, what degradation, what sacrifice he imposed.

"I'll do anything—I'll be abject—I'll be vile—I'll go down in the dust!"

"I ask nothing of you, and I have nothing to do with you," Ransom said. "That is, I ask, at the most, that you shouldn't expect that, wishing to make Verena my wife, I should say to her, 'Oh, yes, you can take an hour or two out of it!' Verena," he went on, "all this is out of it—dreadfully, odiously—and it's a great deal too much! Come, come as far away from here as possible, and we'll settle the rest!"

The combined effort of Mr. Filer and Selah Tarrant to pacify the public had not, apparently, the success it deserved; the house continued in uproar and the volume of sound increased. "Leave us alone, leave us alone for a single minute!" cried Verena; "just let me speak to him, and it will be all right!" She rushed over to her mother, drew her, dragged her from the sofa, led her to the door of the room. Mrs. Tarrant, on the way, reunited herself with Olive (the horror of the situation had at least that compensation for her), and, clinging and staggering together, the distracted women, pushed by Verena, passed into the vestibule, now,

as Ransom saw, deserted by the policeman and the reporter, who had rushed round to where the battle was thickest.

"Oh, why did you come—why, why?" And Verena, turning back, threw herself upon him with a protest which was all, and more than all, a surrender. She had never yet given herself to him so much as in that movement of reproach.

"Didn't you expect me, and weren't you sure?" he asked, smiling at her and standing there till she arrived.

"I didn't know—it was terrible—it's awful! I saw you in your place, in the house, when you came. As soon as we got here I went out to those steps that go up to the stage and I looked out, with my father—from behind him —and saw you in a minute. Then I felt too nervous to speak! I could never, never, if you were there! My father didn't know you, and I said nothing, but Olive guessed as soon as I came back. She rushed at me, and she looked at me—oh, how she looked! and she guessed. She didn't need to go out to see for herself, and when she saw how I was trembling she began to tremble herself, to believe, as I believed, we were lost. Listen to them, listen to them, in the house! Now I want you to go away—I will see you tomorrow, as long as you wish. That's all I want now; if you will only go away it's not too late, and everything will be all right!"

Preoccupied as Ransom was with the simple purpose of getting her bodily out of the place, he could yet notice her strange, touching tone, and her air of believing that she might really persuade him. She had evidently given up everything now—every pretense of a different conviction and of loyalty to her cause; all this had fallen from her as soon as she felt him near, and she asked him to go away just as any plighted maiden might have asked any favor of her lover. But it was the poor girl's misfortune that, whatever she did or said, or left unsaid, only had the effect of making her dearer to him and making the people who were clamoring for her seem more and more a raving rabble.

He indulged not in the smallest recognition of her request, and simply said, "Surely Olive must have believed, must have known, I would come."

"She would have been sure if you hadn't become so unexpectedly quiet after I left Marmion. You seemed to concur, to be willing to wait."

"So I was, for a few weeks. But they ended yesterday. I was furious that morning, when I learned your flight, and during the week that followed I made two or three attempts to find you. Then I stopped—I thought it better. I saw you were very well hidden; I determined not even to write. I felt I *could* wait—with that last day at Marmion to think of. Besides, to leave you with her awhile, for the last, seemed more decent. Perhaps you'll tell me now where you were."

"I was with father and mother. She sent me to them that morning, with a letter. I don't know what was in it. Perhaps there was money," said Verena, who evidently now would tell him everything.

"And where did they take you?"

"I don't know—to places. I was in Boston once, for a day; but only in a carriage. They were as frightened as Olive; they were bound to save me!"

"They shouldn't have brought you here tonight then. How could you possibly doubt of my coming?"

"I don't know what I thought, and I didn't know, till I saw you, that all the strength I had hoped for would leave me in a flash, and that if I attempted to speak—with you sitting there—I should make the most shameful failure. We had a sickening scene here—I begged for delay, for time to recover. We waited and waited, and when I heard you at the door talking to the policeman, it seemed to me everything was gone. But it will still come back, if you will leave me. They are quiet again—father must be interesting them."

"I hope he is!" Ransom exclaimed. "If Miss Chancellor ordered the policeman, she must have expected me."

"That was only after she knew you were in the house. She flew out into the lobby with father, and they seized him and posted him there. She locked the door; she seemed to think they would break it down. I didn't wait for that, but from the moment I knew you were on the other side of it I couldn't go on—I was paralyzed. It has made me feel better to talk to you—and now I could appear," Verena added.

"My darling child, haven't you a shawl or a mantle?" Ransom returned, for all answer, looking about him. He perceived, tossed upon a chair, a long, furred cloak, which he caught up, and, before she could resist, threw over her. She even let him arrange it and, standing there, draped from head to foot in it, contented herself with saying, after a moment:

"I don't understand—where shall we go? Where will you take me?"

"We shall catch the night-train for New York, and the first thing in the morning we shall be married."

Verena remained gazing at him, with swimming eyes. "And what will the people do? Listen, listen!"

"Your father is ceasing to interest them. They'll howl and thump, according to their nature."

"Ah, their nature's fine!" Verena pleaded.

"Dearest, that's one of the fallacies I shall have to woo you from. Hear them, the senseless brutes!" The storm was now raging in the hall, and it deepened to such a point that Verena turned to him in a supreme appeal.

"I could soothe them with a word!"

"Keep your soothing words for me—you will have need of them all, in our coming time," Ransom said, laughing. He pulled open the door again, which led into the lobby, but he was driven back, with Verena, by a furious onset from Mrs. Tarrant. Seeing her daughter fairly arrayed for departure, she hurled herself upon her, half in indignation, half in a blind impulse to cling, and with an outpouring of tears, reproaches, prayers, strange scraps of argument and iterations of farewell, closed her about with an embrace which was partly a supreme caress, partly the salutary castigation she had, three minutes before, expressed the wish to administer, and altogether for the moment a check upon the girl's flight.

"Mother, dearest, it's all for the best, I can't help it, I love you just the same; let me go, let me go!" Verena stammered, kissing her again, struggling to free herself, and holding out her hand to Ransom. He saw now that she only wanted to get away, to leave everything behind her. Olive was close at hand, on the threshold of the room, and as soon as Ransom looked at her he became aware that the weakness she had just shown had passed away. She had straightened herself again, and she was upright in her desolation. The expression of her face was a thing to remain with him forever; it was impossible to imagine a more vivid presentment of blighted hope and wounded pride. Dry, desperate, rigid, she yet wavered and seemed uncertain; her pale, glittering eyes straining forward, as if they were looking for death. Ransom had a vision, even at that crowded moment, that if she could have met it there and then, bristling with steel or lurid with fire, she would have rushed on it without a tremor, like the heroine that she was. All this while the great agitation in the hall rose and fell, in waves and surges, as if Selah Tarrant and the agent were talking to the multitude, trying to calm them, succeeding for the moment, and then letting them loose again. Whirled down by one of the fitful gusts, a lady and a gentleman issued from the passage, and Ransom, glancing at them, recognized Mrs. Farrinder and her husband.

"Well, Miss Chancellor," said that more successful woman, with considerable asperity, "if this is the way you're going to reinstate our sex!" She passed rapidly through the room, followed by Amariah, who remarked in his transit that it seemed as if there had been a want of organization, and the two retreated expeditiously, without the lady's having taken the smallest notice of Verena, whose conflict with her mother prolonged itself. Ransom, striving, with all needful consideration for Mrs. Tarrant, to separate these two, addressed not a word to Olive; it was the last of her, for him, and he neither saw how her livid face suddenly glowed, as if Mrs. Farrinder's words had been a lash, nor how, as if with a sudden inspiration, she rushed to the approach to the platform. If he had observed her, it might have seemed to him that she hoped to find the fierce expiration she sought for in exposure to the thousands she had disappointed and deceived, in offering herself to be trampled to death and torn to pieces. She might have suggested to him some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, erect on a barricade, or even the sacrificial figure of Hypatia, whirled through the furious mob of Alexandria. She was arrested an instant by the arrival of Mrs. Burrage and her son, who had quitted the stage on observing the withdrawal of the Farrinders, and who swept into the room in the manner of people seeking shelter from a thunderstorm. The mother's face expressed the well-bred surprise of a person who should have been asked out to dinner and seen the cloth pulled off the table; the young man, who supported her on his arm, instantly lost himself in the spectacle of Verena disengaging herself from Mrs. Tarrant, only to be again overwhelmed, and in the unexpected presence of the Mississippian. His handsome blue eyes turned from one to the other, and he looked infinitely annoyed and bewildered. It even seemed to occur to him that he might, perhaps, interpose with effect, and he evidently would have liked to say that, without really bragging, *he* would at least have kept the affair from turning into a row. But Verena, muffled and escaping, was deaf to him, and Ransom didn't look the right person to address such a remark as that to. Mrs. Burrage and Olive, as the latter shot past, exchanged a glance which represented quick irony on one side and indiscriminating defiance on the other.

"Oh, are *you* going to speak?" the lady from New York inquired, with her cursory laugh.

Olive had already disappeared; but Ransom heard her answer flung behind her into the room. "I am going to be hissed and hooted and insulted!"

"Olive, Olive!" Verena suddenly shrieked; and her piercing cry might have reached the front. But Ransom had already, by muscular force, wrenched her away, and was hurrying her out, leaving Mrs. Tarrant to heave herself into the arms of Mrs. Burrage, who, he was sure, would, within the minute, loom upon her attractively through her tears, and supply her with a reminiscence, destined to be valuable, of aristocratic support and clever composure. In the outer labyrinth hasty groups, a little scared, were leaving the hall, giving up the game. Ransom, as he went, thrust the hood of Verena's long cloak over her head, to conceal her face and her identity. It quite prevented recognition, and as they mingled in the issuing crowd he perceived the quick, complete, tremendous silence which, in the hall, had greeted Olive Chancellor's rush to the front. Every sound instantly dropped, the hush was respectful, the great public waited, and whatever she should say to them (and he thought she might indeed be rather embarrassed), it was not apparent that they were likely to hurl the benches at her. Ransom, palpitating with his victory, felt now a little sorry for her, and was relieved to know that, even when exasperated, a Boston audience is not ungenerous. "Ah, now I am glad!" said Verena, when they reached the street. But though she was glad, he

presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union, so far from brilliant, into which she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed.

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Las bostonianas

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Introducción de
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Traducción de
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Introducción

(Se advierte al lector que en la introducción se desvelan detalles de la trama de la novela)

I

Muchos lectores, entre los que me encuentro, consideran *Las bostonianas* la mejor novela de Henry James. (James, por su parte, la describió en 1885 como «la mejor obra de ficción que he escrito».)[1] Situada entre sus novelas de aprendizaje y las obras profundamente complejas y difíciles de su madurez, *Las bostonianas* resulta especial por varios motivos.

El primer motivo puede parecer irrelevante: se trata de una de las novelas omitidas en la edición de Nueva York de la obra de ficción de James, compuesta por veintiséis volúmenes y publicada entre 1907 y 1909. Para esa edición, James (cuya última novela terminada, *La copa dorada*, había sido publicada en 1904) se comprometió no solo a reeditar la mayoría de sus novelas y relatos con prólogos nuevos, sino también a revisar exhaustivamente el estilo en el que habían sido escritas sus primeras obras. La empresa era sin duda bienintencionada: de hecho, los prólogos de James constituyen uno de los documentos más importantes de la historia crítica de la novela. Lo que no está tan claro es si fue acertado por su parte volver sobre sus primeros éxitos con una actitud y un programa estéticos desarrollados mucho después. Fueran cuales fuesen sus opiniones al respecto, tres novelas en concreto no se incluyeron en la edición de Nueva York, y por lo tanto solo existen en su forma original. Curiosamente, las tres están ambientadas en Estados Unidos: *Los europeos* (1878), *Washington Square* (1880) y *Las bostonianas* (1886). Indudablemente James quería incluir *Las bostonianas*:

«Supongo», escribió refiriéndose a la edición de Nueva York en 1908, con la complejidad de su estilo «tardío»,

> que tal vez haya que dedicar un par de volúmenes adicionales a ciertas omisiones demasiado evidentes […] Tengo, además, la vaga intención de presentar de nuevo, con abundantes aderezo y supresión, la excesivamente prolija pero, por algún motivo, medianamente satisfactoria y pasable *Las bostonianas* de hace casi un cuarto de siglo; a esa obra no se le hizo, a pesar de mi muy disciplinada paciencia, ninguna justicia. Pero requerirá, indudablemente, una cuidada reelaboración…[2]

Las bostonianas nunca recibió esa «cuidada reelaboración» ni ese «aderezo», y siempre habrá lectores que se alegren de que conserve intacta su frescura y brillantez originales.

El segundo rasgo que diferencia *Las bostonianas* de muchas otras novelas de James es algo a lo que solo puedo referirme como su enfoque. Ante todo, es la más divertida de sus grandes novelas. Ciertamente, el humor está más marcado al principio, pero no desaparece del todo hasta la última frase, y posee un vigor y una ligereza dignos en ocasiones del mismísimo Oscar Wilde. «¿No le preocupa a usted el progreso humano?», pregunta Olive Chancellor, una de las dos heroínas feministas de la novela, al héroe en el capítulo III. «No lo sé…», contesta Basil Ransom. «Nunca lo he visto. ¿Podría usted mostrarme alguno?» El carácter directo, conciso y áspero de este intercambio de palabras es típico de *Las bostonianas*, pero muy atípico de James en general, y es una lástima que no lo ejercitase más a menudo. (Tampoco está presente en las obras de teatro que escribió, que constituyen un material tedioso.) El humor tampoco aparece porque sí: su carácter escéptico, cínico y polémico surge directamente, y es partícipe, del meollo de la novela y de la lucha ideológica dramatizada en ella.

Del mismo modo que *Las bostonianas* es más divertida que ninguna otra novela de James, también es más física. Hay un mayor sentido del entorno material de lo que era común en él. El autor se toma tiempo —de forma razonada y pertinente, y siempre con un sentido dramático— para describir los ambientes de los personajes, ya sean las extensiones arenosas de Cape Cod y las casitas de madera allí construidas, o el propio Boston (de la deseable residencia en Charles Street con vistas a la Back Bay, a las

casas de huéspedes del South End; de las recientes zonas residenciales de los nuevos terrenos ganados al río Charles, a las viviendas baratas de Cambridge, contiguas a la Universidad de Harvard; y del Memorial Hall de Harvard, al Music Hall del centro de la ciudad, por no hablar de las calles y los tranvías que conectan todos esos lugares). La mejor de las descripciones es la del barrio de Nueva York donde vive el héroe, que introduce de forma decisiva el libro segundo de la novela. «Menciono todo esto», comenta falsamente el narrador, «no porque tenga ninguna influencia especial en la vida o en el pensamiento de Basil Ransom, sino por un viejo prurito de situar la escena y por obtener algún efecto de color local» (capítulo XXI). En realidad, y a pesar de las evasivas del narrador, debemos ser conscientes de la profunda influencia que ha ejercido el nuevo entorno de Ransom en su progreso intelectual. En particular, ha reforzado su conservadurismo sureño. El simple «color local» no es tal. En su miserable entorno, por ejemplo, el elemento menos importante no es ni mucho menos la «pequeña y arrugada *table d'hôte*» donde Ransom cena, que «funcionaba en los sótanos bajo la dirección de una pareja de desganadas negras, que se mezclaban en la conversación general y que emitían risitas semirreprimidas y misteriosas cuando aquella tomaba un tono atrevido». ¡Imagina a un pobre pero sensible y contumaz exiliado blanco del orgulloso Mississippi teniendo que codearse con una compañía como esa! (La novela está ambientada en la década de 1870: dentro o cerca del período conocido —un tanto parcialmente— como «la Reconstrucción», durante el cual América se lamió las terribles heridas de la guerra de Secesión, librada en buena parte por el problema de la esclavitud de los negros en los estados del Sur. Durante ese período, en efecto, el Norte impuso su dominio sobre el Sur.)[3]

Nueva York tiene un impacto parecido pero totalmente distinto en la otra heroína de la novela, la joven Verena Tarrant. El narrador dice, informando de su reacción ante la ciudad (capítulo XXX), que había «algo en aquella atmósfera que la embargaba con un sentimiento de amplitud y variedad: eran las posibilidades incalculables de una gran ciudad, las cuales —Verena no sabía si debía reconocerlo sinceramente— hubieran podido suplir la seriedad de Boston». No es de extrañar que Verena sienta que sus principios feministas peligran entre los antros de libertinaje de Nueva York: «Desde la ventanilla del carruaje dirigía la mirada a la brillante y animada ciudad, donde los

elementos de atracción parecían tan numerosos, la animación tan inmensa, las tiendas tan brillantes, las mujeres tan extraordinariamente bien vestidas, y sabía que todas aquellas cosas despertaban su curiosidad, le aceleraban el pulso». El ambiente, pues, ya sea la miseria en la que Basil vive o el glamour al que la joven Verena reacciona instintivamente, es un aspecto de la vida interior de los personajes en *Las bostonianas*, y en un grado sumo. Ciertamente, la presentación que James ofrece de Nueva York en su período de incipiente modernidad es extraordinaria, y extraordinariamente moderna por sí misma: por encima de las cinematográficas descripciones de Central Park, la Sexta Avenida con Central Park o el ferrocarril elevado, «cruzaba transversalmente la calle, oscurecida y sofocada por la desmesurada espina dorsal y por millares de huesos de un monstruo antediluviano» (capítulo XXI).

El entorno no es lo único que aparece de esa forma. La gente también: no solo por los retratos completos que la novela ofrece, sino a cada instante, a medida que los individuos interactúan. El efecto es palpable incluso en las primeras páginas de la novela: «Basil Ransom se quedó perplejo; la luz amarillenta en sus ojos castaños se hizo más profunda»; la mano de Olive en las de Ransom «era fría y blanda; ella solo la había dejado entre las suyas, sin ejercer la menor presión». La atracción erótica que Basil siente por Verena se resume gráficamente durante su visita a la sórdida casa de los padres de ella en el capítulo XXIV: la chica «se dejó caer en el destartalado sofá con un efecto tan encantador como si hubiera sido una ninfa que se tendiera sobre una piel de leopardo». Ese tipo de fisicidad persistente, impactante y detallada está muy lejos del posterior modus operandi novelesco de James, inaugurado en concreto por *La edad ingrata* (1899), que se desarrolla casi por completo a través de una serie de conversaciones en salones. En resumen, mientras que las novelas posteriores de James a menudo nos animan a sustituir el mundo físico por el mundo psicológico-moral, *Las bostonianas*, en virtud de su humor y su fisicidad, constituye una lectura decididamente provocadora.

Hay un último elemento que diferencia *Las bostonianas* de otras novelas de James y que la hace especialmente accesible —y también especialmente importante— para los lectores modernos. Tiene que ver, en parte, con su carácter americano, pues es de lejos la más americana de sus novelas. (*Los europeos* tiene tanto que decir sobre las

costumbres europeas como sobre las americanas, y *Washington Square* se podría ambientar más o menos en cualquier sitio.) También tiene que ver, en parte, con la insistente modernidad del entorno de la que hemos hablado más arriba. Me refiero al tema social de la novela: el despertar del feminismo en el Boston de finales del siglo XIX. James nunca pasará a la historia como novelista de temas sociales en el sentido estricto o cotidiano. Sin duda le interesaba la sociedad, como prácticamente a todos los novelistas del siglo XIX, pero normalmente ese interés no se manifestaba en una fijación en temas sociales concretos (la pobreza o la ley o el sistema de clases asociados a Dickens, por ejemplo, o el tratamiento del sionismo en *Daniel Deronda*, de George Eliot). Solo dos de las novelas de James abordan «temas sociales» en ese sentido público y político: *Las bostonianas* y su casi contemporánea *La princesa Casamassima* (también de 1886, pero posterior), que se centra en las sectas y los complots revolucionarios en el Londres de su época. Las dos novelas fueron un fracaso en su día, incluso para James.[4] Quiso la suerte que *Las bostonianas* fuera apreciada por los británicos pero rechazada por los americanos, al considerarla un retrato profundamente inexacto de la sociedad de Boston, mientras que *La princesa Casamassima* fue apreciada en América pero ridiculizada en Inglaterra por el mismo motivo pero a la inversa. James, que trataba de aprender las lecciones derivadas de su falta de éxito popular y adaptarse a las circunstancias, abandonó rápidamente la novela política. Con el tiempo, se ha reivindicado el mérito artístico de *La princesa Casamassima*, pero las comparaciones con su compañera revelan sus defectos de forma determinante. En lo que a la princesa respecta, concretamente, la tendencia de James a idealizar en exceso a sus personajes femeninos se lleva casi al paroxismo, y el elemento político no resulta dramáticamente convincente, plagado como está de interferencias y de anarquistas y asesinos prototípicos. Comparado con *Las bostonianas* —o con *Los demonios* (1871), de Dostoievski, o *El agente secreto* (1907), de Joseph Conrad—, el tratamiento es de una afectación lamentable.[5]

II

De modo que *Las bostonianas* ocupa un lugar especial en la obra de ficción de James y se distingue por su calidad incluso de su otra novela política importante. Pero también ocupa un lugar especial en el desarrollo de la novela inglesa del siglo XIX, y en concreto en la forma de representar o dramatizar las profundas fuerzas intelectuales, culturales y económicas que estaban transformando la sociedad de la época. En este sentido, *Las bostonianas* es una de las novelas más originales de James, además de una de las mejores.

Para ilustrar este punto volvamos a una ocasión especialmente propicia. A la edad de veintisiete años, el incipiente escritor americano redactó una reseña sin firmar de la obra maestra de George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, para la revista *Galaxy* (Nueva York) en marzo de 1873. James observó:

> Ciertamente las mentes más brillantes tienen los defectos de sus cualidades, y como la mente de George Eliot es fundamentalmente contemplativa y analítica, nada resulta más natural que su actitud sea prolija y expansiva. La «concentración» sin duda nos habría privado de muchos de los mejores elementos del libro: los herederos grotescamente impacientes de Peter Featherstone, los rivales médicos de Lydgate y la encantadora familia de Mary Garth. El objetivo de la autora era ser una generosa historiadora rural, y ese exceso de detalles, producto de los abundantes recuerdos, es uno de los mayores encantos del libro. Es como si su memoria estuviera llena de antiguas figuras a las que debiera conceder una aparición por pura delicadeza. Su novela es un cuadro: inmenso, repleto, pintado con intensos colores, lleno de episodios, con gráficas imágenes, indefinibles golpes maestros, brillantes pasajes expresivos; y como tal podemos aceptarla libremente y disfrutarla. No es concisa, sin duda, pero ¿cuándo ha sido un panorama conciso?[6]

Es una crítica decisiva y portentosa, sobre todo considerando la gran admiración de James por Eliot y la profunda influencia que sus obras tuvieron en él. Hace mucho que se viene observando, por ejemplo, que otra de sus novelas más importantes, *Retrato de una dama* (1881), es en muchos aspectos una versión de la llamativa descripción de un matrimonio infeliz llevada a cabo por la novelista en *Daniel Deronda* (1876). James calificaría más adelante *Guerra y paz*, de Tolstói, *Los tres mosqueteros*, de Dumas, y *Los Newcome*, de Thackeray, en unos términos parecidos a los referidos a *Middlemarch* como «monstruos grandes, laxos e hinchados»;[7] pero esos libros no eran ni la mitad de importantes para él que los de Eliot. De modo que su crítica de Eliot de 1873 es especialmente elocuente por lo que revela de su programa estético como novelista. *Middlemarch* es «inmenso, repleto […] lleno de episodios»; no es conciso

sino un panorama; se puede sostener que se habría beneficiado de una mayor «concentración». En esta pieza temprana ya advertimos lo que se convertiría en la fijación habitual de James en su madurez: la economía, la estructura, el sentido dramático, en oposición a los excesos novelísticos que acostumbraba a hallar en las obras posteriores de Dickens y Eliot, o en *Guerra y paz* y *Crimen y castigo*. (Tolstói y D[ostoievski], escribió a Hugh Walpole el 19 de mayo de 1912, «son como pudín líquido».)[8] Es la fijación que en el prólogo de *Los tesoros de Poynton* le llevó a comparar «la sublime economía del arte» con el «espléndido desperdicio» de la vida,[9] y de todos sus principios estéticos es el que expuso más insistentemente, a veces hasta extremos quejumbrosos.

Más adelante, en la reseña de *Middlemarch*, James se extendía sobre su reacción ambivalente a la novela de George Eliot: «La presencia constante de reflexión, de instinto generalizador, de cerebro, en una palabra, tras su observación […] concede a esta su gran valor y a su actitud su elevada superioridad. Denota una mente en la que la imaginación se halla iluminada por facultades que rara vez se encuentran asociadas a ella». Mientras que Fielding, el autor de *Tom Jones*, era didáctico, Eliot «es muy filosófica». «Estas grandes cualidades —empero— entrañan peligros equivalentes»: una pérdida de simplicidad, por ejemplo; un carácter discursivo; y el deseo del autor «de decir demasiadas cosas y decirlas demasiado bien». En conclusión, *Middlemarch* «marca un techo, creemos, en el desarrollo de la anticuada novela inglesa. Su prolijidad, tema que ya hemos tocado, hace que una dosis de ficción pura resulte demasiado abundante. Si escribimos novelas así, ¿cómo escribiremos la historia?».

Desde la reseña de *Middlemarch* podemos avanzar exactamente diez años en el tiempo, hasta el 8 de abril de 1883, en Boston, cuando James transcribió en su cuaderno de apuntes una carta que había escrito a su editor americano, J. R. Osgood. Pese a ser larga, es una misiva importante.

> El escenario de la historia es Boston y su barrio; relata un episodio relacionado con el denominado «movimiento de la mujer». Los personajes que figuran en ella son en su mayoría personas de tipo reformista radical, especialmente interesados en lograr que las mujeres se emancipen, concederles el sufragio, liberarlas de la esclavitud, coeducarlas con los hombres, etc. Lo consideran el gran problema del momento: la reforma más urgente y sagrada. La heroína es una joven muy lista y «talentosa», relacionada de nacimiento y por las circunstancias con un círculo inmerso en esas opiniones y en toda nueva agitación, hija de antiguos abolicionistas, espiritualistas,

trascendentalistas, etc. Ella también se interesa por la causa, pero es objeto de un interés todavía mayor por parte de su familia y amigos, que han descubierto en ella un extraordinario talento natural para hablar en público con el que la creen capaz de convencer a una audiencia numerosa y prestar una gran ayuda en la liberación de su sexo. La quieren como a una especie de apóstol o de redentora. Ella está de muy buen ver, y su don para hablar es todo un estímulo. Tiene una amiga íntima, otra joven, que procede de un círculo social totalmente distinto (una exclusiva familia rica y conservadora) y que se ha lanzado a esas cuestiones con intenso fervor y alberga una apasionada admiración por nuestra muchacha, sobre la cual, gracias a un carácter completamente distinto, ha adquirido una gran influencia. Ella tiene dinero propio, pero carece de talento para aparecer en público y sueña con que ella y su amiga (una usando su dinero y la otra su elocuencia) consigan, trabajando codo con codo, revolucionar la condición de las mujeres. Lo considera una tarea noble y ambiciosa, una misión por la que hay que sacrificar todo lo demás, y cuenta tácitamente con su amiga. Sin embargo, esta conoce a un joven que se enamora de ella y por el que ella a su vez se interesa enormemente, pero que, debido a su temperamento realista y conservador, se opone firmemente al sufragio femenino y otras reformas parecidas. Cuanto más ve a la heroína, más la ama y más decidido está a liberarla de las garras de sus amigos reformistas, a los que detesta con toda su alma. Le pide que se case con él y no le oculta que, si lo hace, deberá renunciar por completo a su «misión». Ella cree que lo ama, pero que el sacrificio de la citada misión sería terrible y que la decepción que causaría a su familia y amigos, y sobre todo a la joven rica, sería peor. Su amado es un pariente lejano de la joven rica, quien en mala hora, por casualidad, y antes de haberse informado de las opiniones del joven (ha pasado diez años en el Oeste), se lo presentó. Le pide a su amiga que se mantenga firme en nombre de su amistad y de todas las esperanzas depositadas en el talento de la joven. La historia relata la lucha que se produce en la mente de esta. Después de varias vicisitudes, la lucha termina con ella renunciando a todo, rompiendo definitivamente con su amiga en una terrible entrevista final y entregándose a su amante. Hay otros personajes que no he mencionado —agitadores radicales— y tantas escenas pequeñas como pueda introducir sobre la agitación por los derechos de la mujer. Esto para Osgood.[10]

Si uno tropieza con esta carta después de haber leído *Las bostonianas*, reconoce que es un resumen de la novela: está claro que la heroína es Verena Tarrant, la joven rica es Olive Chancellor y el amante es Basil Ransom. La situación es la misma en casi todos los aspectos, aunque Ransom ha pasado de ser un pariente del Oeste que se está recuperando a uno que viene del Sur, una modificación muy importante sobre la que volveré más adelante. Sin embargo, por otra parte, ¡qué distinta resulta de la novela terminada! En concreto, este resumen nos explica muy poco sobre cómo se desarrolla la novela: cómo la visita de Olive para conocer a Verena es casi tan importante como su relación posterior; lo extraordinariamente intensa que es su relación, al menos desde el punto de vista de Olive; lo decididamente poco convencionales que son los sentimientos de Basil hacia Verena; lo profundamente que se opone a la gente a la que llama «las damas de Boston» (capítulo IX) tanto en el plano intelectual como en el ideológico; y lo estrechamente ligados que están a la relación triangular, en el seno de

la novela, los «otros personajes» mencionados por James. En resumen, cómo la novela sobrepasa el melodramático y en esencia predecible interés amoroso de una novela convencional de finales de la época victoriana que James esbozó a su editor.

Y precisamente de eso se trata. El objetivo del resumen es despertar el interés de su editor por una antigua fórmula dándole un nuevo giro: la heroína es una feminista; el héroe es un machista; el «rival» no es otro hombre, sino una amiga y compañera de causa (aunque con un carácter muy intenso). «Esto para Osgood», escribe James, y acto seguido continúa para sí mismo:

> Debo volver sobre esto con más detalle. El tema es potente y tiene un gran interés. La relación de las muchachas debería ser un estudio de una de esas amistades entre mujeres que son tan habituales en Nueva Inglaterra. Lo más local, lo más americano posible, y lleno del espíritu de Boston: un intento de demostrar que puedo escribir una historia americana. Debe haber, forzosamente, un personaje periodista: el hombre cuyo ideal es el reportero enérgico. Me gustaría *bafouer* [ridiculizar, satirizar] lo vulgar y repugnante de esa idea —la insolente invasión de la intimidad—, la extinción de todo concepto de intimidad, etc. *La evangelista*, de Daudet,[11] me ha dado la idea. ¡Ojalá pudiera hacer algo con esa cualidad pictórica! En cualquier caso, el tema es muy nacional, muy típico. Quería escribir una historia muy americana, una historia muy característica de nuestras condiciones sociales, y me pregunté cuál era el rasgo más destacado y específico de nuestra vida social. La respuesta era la situación de las mujeres, la decadencia del sentimiento sexual, la agitación desatada en su nombre.

Resulta fácil ver el cambio en el acento: de lo que un escritor le podría contar a un editor sobre un libro y su mercado potencial a lo que podría pensar de ese mismo libro en privado. No obstante, este párrafo explica la gran diferencia entre el resumen de *Las bostonianas* enviado a Osgood y la obra enormemente más profunda que estamos leyendo. Es más: ese matiz también explica la diferencia entre «la anticuada novela inglesa», que según James había agonizado con *Middlemarch*, y el tipo de novela que él quería escribir. (Y no solo eso, sino también la diferencia entre *Las bostonianas* y *La princesa Casamassima* como novelas sobre la sociedad.) Merece la pena señalar, por ejemplo, que James menciona a Osgood «otros personajes» y «tantas escenas pequeñas como pueda introducir sobre la agitación por los derechos de la mujer». En este punto volvemos inequívocamente al estilo de presentación que James había criticado de *Middlemarch*: el panorama desplegado por un generoso historiador, caudaloso y redundante, lleno de figuras y de episodios, compuesto de escenas y personajes que solo participan tangencialmente en la acción; una abundante dosis de

ficción pura. Eso era lo que Osgood esperaba, lo que el público compraba; por lo tanto, había que describírsela en esos términos.

Sin embargo, James quería que *Las bostonianas* «ilustre algunas de mis convicciones artísticas».[12] Su intención era como mínimo ser tan contemplativo y analítico como la autora de *Middlemarch*. Él tenía algo que decir —o que preguntar— sobre la sociedad, igual que George Eliot. Él también era «muy filosófico» y poseía cerebro (en una palabra). Todo ello resulta evidente en sus otros comentarios. «Me pregunté cuál era el rasgo más destacado y específico de nuestra vida social. La respuesta era la situación de las mujeres, la decadencia del sentimiento sexual, la agitación desatada en su nombre.» Solo que esta vez el enfoque no será el de Eliot, aunque quería que su narración estuviera llena del espíritu de Boston del mismo modo que *Middlemarch* está llena del espíritu de la región central de Inglaterra. Si ella escribía con la generosidad dramática y anecdótica de una historiadora, James trabajaría de forma distinta. Su enfoque no sería «histórico»; en lugar de ello, su disección contemplativa y analítica de la sociedad sería de carácter «poético» o «dramático». No revelaría un deseo de inclusión grande, laxo e hinchado, sino que estaría imbuido de un principio de selección poético e ilustrativo. «La vida es toda inclusión y confusión, mientras que el arte es todo discriminación y selección —escribió muchos años más tarde—; este último, en busca del recio valor oculto que es el único que le concierne, olfatea la masa de forma tan instintiva y certera como un perro que recela de un hueso enterrado».[13] «Me pregunté cuál era la cuestión más notable y peculiar de nuestra vida social. La respuesta era […]» De modo que la «cualidad pictórica» que James buscaba (y que asociaba con Alphonse Daudet) dista mucho de las «pequeñas escenas» que ofreció a su editor por una parte y del panorama que había encontrado en *Middlemarch* por otra.

Pero es fácil hablar de un principio poético o dramático, o de un perro que olfatea un hueso ficticio, o proponer que *Las bostonianas* es poética de un modo análogo a *El arco iris*, de D. H. Lawrence, antes que al de *Jane Eyre*, de Charlotte Brontë. («Poética», claro está, en el enfoque que la novela adopta de la sociedad y no de la psicología.) ¿Qué significa exactamente eso? ¿Cómo se ponen de manifiesto esas diferencias y acentos en la propia novela? Estas preguntas se responden de dos

maneras: en la presentación que James hace de sus personajes y en su construcción de la novela como un todo. Con respecto a la segunda, *Las bostonianas* está ciertamente elaborada con mucha destreza. Posee no solo una cualidad pictórica, sino algo equivalente a una cualidad arquitectónica. Por ejemplo, la novela está dividida en tres libros. No tienen el mismo tamaño ni guardan relación con las divisiones de la edición original del libro: su función es totalmente estética. El libro primero consta del capítulo I al XX; el libro segundo, del XXI al XXXIV; y el libro tercero, del XXXV al XLII: la novela avanza en una secuencia espacial decreciente hasta el final. Cada parte está ambientada en un lugar distinto: el libro primero, en Boston; el libro segundo, en Nueva York; y el libro tercero, en Cape Cod y luego en Boston otra vez (hay un intermedio de diez semanas entre el capítulo XXXIX y los capítulos finales). La segunda parte y la tercera empiezan con descripciones cuidadosamente construidas para señalar el cambio de escena, del barrio de Basil en Nueva York (como hemos visto) y del lugar de veraneo al final de la temporada. El efecto de esta concentración del foco es precisamente dotar a los tres últimos episodios de la mayor emoción posible e imponer a lo largo de los libros segundo y tercero una sensación de ritmo, urgencia e intensidad crecientes. (La maestría de James es tal que utiliza el anticlímax como una forma de clímax, valga la paradoja. Véase la muerte de la señorita Birdseye en el capítulo XXXVIII o al corpulento policía que impide a Basil entrar en la sala de espera del Music Hall en el capítulo XLI.) Como en una ópera, los actos se van abreviando a medida que avanzan hacia la culminación.

Esta «arquitectura» teatral aparece una y otra vez en el libro: es la señal de la discriminación y la selección del arte en oposición al espléndido desperdicio de la vida y la generosidad del historiador. (Todo ello convierte esta novela, a pesar de los comentarios vertidos por James en 1908, en lo contrario de algo «prolijo»: una acusación dirigida con más justicia a *La princesa Casamassima*.) Ese principio teatral no es «realista» en el mismo sentido en que lo es *La princesa Casamassima*; no es plausible en el sentido cotidiano de la palabra, pero es coherente en los términos que la propia novela ha establecido. Ahí está, por ejemplo, el momento maravillosamente teatral al final del capítulo XI. En el momento en que Olive ha obligado a Verena a «renunciar, contenerte, abstenerte» (por encima de todo, claro está, de los hombres), ¿a

quién iba a presentar la camarera sino al mismísimo Basil? Si bien eso es poco probable en el sentido histórico, está lleno de verdad poética: la heroína es mostrada en el acto debatiéndose entre los dos rivales. En el otro extremo de la novela, en los capítulos XXXII y XXIII-XXXIV, las dos heroínas van a hacer distintos recados: Olive a visitar a la señora Burrage (una *grande dame* de Nueva York cuyo hijo muestra un pueril interés romántico hacia Verena) y Verena a mantener la larga y culminante conversación con Basil que pone fin al libro segundo. Es difícil resumir los dos hechos sincrónicos: basta con decir que la visita de Olive parece (al menos para ella) aumentar su influencia sobre Verena, mientras que el encuentro de Verena lo pone en peligro. Resulta que Olive vuelve a casa mucho antes que Verena y debe esperar en un suspense angustioso a que ella regrese y le dé una explicación.

Estos detalles contribuyen a la tensión y a la coherencia dramáticas del libro. Pero esta estructura pictórica o arquitectónica funciona también a otros niveles de significado y en otras direcciones. A primera vista, por ejemplo, existe una enorme división entre los personajes moralmente «respetables» o conscientes de la novela (principalmente Olive y Basil) y los turbios y egoístas: sobre todo en sus relaciones con Verena. Tanto Olive como Basil creen sinceramente que actúan en beneficio de Verena; los otros —los padres de Verena, la señora Burrage, el joven periodista amoral Matthias Pardon— obran evidentemente por propio interés, y el narrador lo deja perfectamente claro. Pero ¿es esa división tan indiscutible como parece? Selah Tarrant quiere que su hija ascienda como figura pública; quiere obtener fama (y beneficios, sin duda) de las aptitudes de ella. Pero sentimos la tentación de cuestionar la diferencia entre él y Olive (quien también quiere utilizar el talento de Verena como oradora) y si sus motivos son puros. (Ella misma reconoce arrepentida que ella y Pardon piensan de forma similar cuando se trata de explotar a Verena [capítulo XVI].) En cuanto a Pardon, escribe bazofia para los periódicos de la tarde: «Era el más brillante entrevistador de la prensa de Boston. Había triunfado sobre todo con sus entrevistas a las damas; había confesado en su cuaderno de taquigrafía a muchas de las más célebres mujeres de la época —algunas de estas hijas de la fama eran muy voluminosas— y se le atribuía un notable método de insinuación para aproximarse a las *prime donne* y las actrices a la mañana siguiente de su llegada y a veces en la misma noche, mientras el equipaje yacía

sin desempacar» (capítulo XVI). Basil Ransom escribe —o al menos presenta— influyentes artículos políticos para la *Rational Review* y otras revistas para intelectuales: un editor «le hizo notar que sus doctrinas tenían unos trescientos años de retraso; indudablemente alguna revista del siglo XVI se hubiera sentido muy feliz de poder publicarlas. Eso iluminó sus propias sospechas de estar ligado a causas que, por su esencia misma, no podían ser sino impopulares» (capítulo XXI). Pero, por otra parte, ¿cuánta diferencia hay entre las ambiciones literarias de un hombre y las de otro, o el valor de lo que escriben? ¿Dónde pueden poner el límite los lectores? ¿Hay un límite? Olive Chancellor soborna a los Tarrant con un cheque anual; la señora Burrage, a su vez, intenta hacer más o menos la misma maniobra con Olive (capítulo XXXII) para conseguirle la chica a su hijo. El efecto de esos paralelismos, que demuestran un principio estético de discriminación y selección, es hacer que nos preguntemos exactamente quién tiene la superioridad moral. Dado que la campaña de las feministas consiste en adoptar esa posición de superioridad moral, ver que esta se convierte en un pantano bajo sus pies resulta desconcertante.

La cuestión pictórica o arquitectónica nos lleva inevitablemente al primer punto, el de los personajes que están a su servicio y que la encarnan. Y del mismo modo que los rasgos «estéticos» de la novela que he resumido determinan eficazmente la importancia moral de la novela, también los personajes, pese a ser bastante realistas, distan de ser creaciones naturalistas de tipo documental. A pesar de lo que James parecía insinuar en su carta a Osgood (sobre los «otros personajes» presentados casi fortuitamente), y a pesar de la inclinación «histórica» de la anticuada novela inglesa mostrada por una maestra de su tiempo como George Eliot («llena de figuras»), los personajes de James en *Las bostonianas* son algo más que simples individuos. Graham Burns lo resume perfectamente:

> El libro carece del realismo continuo, denso y minuciosamente observado de, por ejemplo, *Middlemarch*; de hecho, aduciría, *Las bostonianas* podría definirse como «imagística» antes que diagnóstica […] Al dramatizar las vidas y los conflictos interiores de Olive Chancellor —y, en menor medida, de Verena Tarrant y Basil Ransom—, James reconoce implícitamente y dirige nuestra atención a los hábitos e impulsos que no son solo personales e idiosincráticos, sino, a nivel más profundo, sugerentemente regionales y representativos. Los personajes de *Las bostonianas* son memorables por méritos propios (aunque durante gran parte del tiempo Ransom raya en el estereotipo), pero detrás de ellos, por así decirlo, retrocediendo a un pasado regional, se nos pide que sintamos la

presencia de unas tradiciones y culturas circundantes y formativas. Poseen unas referencias y una relevancia como individuos que se extienden, en direcciones claramente marcadas, más allá de sí mismos […].[14]

Estas palabras, creo, plasman las diferencias esenciales entre esta novela y la de Eliot, entre esta novela y la anticuada novela inglesa que James pretendía realinear, y entre *Las bostonianas* y *La princesa Casamassima*. Además de ser individuos —e indudablemente lo son; ya he hablado de su poderosa presencia física en el escenario de la novela, al margen de cualquier otra consideración—, los personajes son representativos, de una forma casi alegórica, de determinadas fuerzas históricas, sociales e ideológicas que James considera que intervienen en la América posterior a la Reconstrucción. El tema, como dijo en su cuaderno de notas, «es muy nacional, muy típico», y quedó clarificado y dramatizado por la tipicidad y por unas figuras representativas. De este modo, la joven heroína indiferente y convencional que James menciona a Osgood no solo está «relacionada de nacimiento y por las circunstancias» con «antiguos abolicionistas, espiritualistas, trascendentalistas, etc.», sino que, como Verena Tarrant, es realmente producto de esos círculos; y esos círculos están representados alegóricamente en la masa por su odioso padre, curandero y taumaturgo, con su «habitual expresión sacerdotal», sus dientes relucientes, su sonrisa («inaudible como un gozne aceitado») (capítulo XIII), su permanente impermeable y sus aventuras extramatrimoniales. Por consiguiente, la actitud y el comportamiento de Verena arrojan luz sobre ellos y sobre el mundo que representan: «Bueno, más bien diría», anuncia Verena a una escandalizada Olive en su primer encuentro a solas, y durante una conversación sobre el matrimonio moderno, «que prefiero la unión libre» (capítulo XI). Matthias Pardon no solo es un indiferente periodista de Boston de la década de 1870; es los propios medios de comunicación, entonces y ahora. La señora Luna es la anticuada mujer que utiliza lo que tiene a su disposición para conseguir lo que quiere, mientras que la doctora Prance es lo contrario a ella: la práctica y sencilla defensora de la emancipación que oculta su sexualidad con tanto éxito para competir en un mundo de hombres que en una ocasión Basil por poco le ofrece un puro (capítulo XXXV). La señorita Birdseye no es una vieja filántropa cualquiera: «Ella era heroica, era sublime, *toda la historia moral de Boston se reflejaba en sus lentes mal colocados*» (las cursivas son mías) (capítulo V). Olive no solo es la indiferente hija de «una exclusiva

familia rica y conservadora»; es el producto y representa lo que Basil Ransom (y también James) caracteriza como una actitud intelectual y moral neurótica típicamente «bostoniana». Basil, por supuesto, representa el Sur de un modo similar. Representa y encarna —de una manera menos global y no exactamente, es cierto— los valores conservadores de un modo que ningún primo del Oeste podría representar. (Es de suponer que alguien del Oeste sería socialmente grosero; Basil es mucho más amenazante que eso.) Y la propia Verena representa sin duda a la joven americana (desenmascarada cruelmente cuando James la describe en un pasaje de su posterior libro de viajes *La escena americana* [1907], en el apéndice 2),[15] pero también algo más. Representa para James nada menos que la joven América, aquejada en el fondo por la gran lucha ideológica resuelta en el plano físico en la guerra de Secesión, pero rabiosa todavía desde el punto de vista ideológico. Es decir, la lucha de feministas contra machistas, de Olive contra Basil, es en sí misma representativa de algo más grande: la lucha entre el Norte y el Sur, pero también la eterna lucha entre progreso y reacción, reforma y conservadurismo. Si James fue o no una poderosa y original mente política, capaz de comprender plenamente las posiciones ideológicas que dramatizaba, apenas importa. Era un novelista, no un politólogo. *Las bostonianas* es, como Graham Burns propone, imagística antes que diagnóstica; la «política» en la novela desaparece hasta cierto punto, o se revela como las superestructuras ideológicas que derivan de las predisposiciones humanas de la literatura de la antigua Grecia y, sin duda, de más allá.

III

Sin embargo, hay que hacerse una pregunta: ¿es *Las bostonianas* una representación válida? ¿Puede una representación paradigmática y sinecdóquica, que toma la parte por el todo de forma alegórica, ser válida? ¿Es válido decir, por ejemplo, que toda la historia moral de Boston se reflejaba en los lentes mal colocados de la señorita Birdseye? Es evidente que no, pero, por otra parte, esa es —en términos ideales, al menos— una de las diferencias entre la historia y el arte: que la primera tiene prohibido ofrecer relatos paradigmáticos, ofrecer la parte por el todo como James hace

aquí. Por supuesto, las reseñas publicadas en su día en América lo acusaron de ser groseramente injusto y de tratar a su pequeño círculo de entusiastas como si fueran todos los bostonianos. (Los lectores de Boston vieron en la señorita Birdseye en concreto un retrato de una ilustre feminista local, Elizabeth Peabody.)[16] James lo negó todo y le dijo a su hermano: «Yo no pretendía generalizar, sino que el título me pareció sencillo y práctico, pensado solo para denominar a Olive y Verena a los ojos de Ransom, el forastero sureño que las observa en Nueva York».[17] Pero si nos fijamos en la divertida caracterización de la señorita Birdseye que termina con el despiadado chiste de sus lentes, descubrimos que no es Ransom el que lo cuenta. En realidad, es Olive la que hace el comentario (tácito), sin un asomo de ironía. La ironía y la risa las pone James. La formidable y cruel descripción de la señorita Birdseye que abre el capítulo IV es igualmente difícil de identificar: ¿es Ransom la conciencia que registra los hechos, o el narrador, o los dos? Y de nuevo, ¿qué hay del «color local» de la sórdida *table d'hôte* neoyorquina de Ransom? Olvidémonos de Ransom. ¿Qué opina James de las dos «desganadas negras» que trabajan allí, que se atreven a mezclarse en la conversación y cuyas risitas son tan misteriosas para los espectadores blancos —lectores incluidos— a los que James imagina?

Así pues, el punto de vista del novelista es un elemento determinante en la historia, otro factor que convierte *Las bostonianas* en una obra excepcional, ya que James insistía normalmente en su neutralidad como observador —cortando el cordón umbilical, en palabras de Leon Edel—[18] y delegaba el punto de vista en uno de los participantes de la ficción, convirtiendo de este modo al narrador parcial, en lugar del omnisciente, en una importante innovación estética de sus novelas. Pero en *Las bostonianas* no podemos evitar pensar en la postura de James; aunque no supiéramos nada de la vida del novelista, nos veríamos obligados a hacerlo por el propio libro. James no era de Boston; ni siquiera de Nueva Inglaterra, en el sentido estricto. Había nacido en Nueva York y había pasado su juventud en Europa con sus padres o en Newport, Rhode Island. Pero aunque no se había criado en Boston, tenía sólidos vínculos bostonianos: Olive Chancellor perdió a dos hermanos en la guerra de Secesión; los dos hermanos pequeños de James también sirvieron, de forma muy distinguida, en regimientos de Boston.[19] Su padre era amigo íntimo de varios

intelectuales de Nueva Inglaterra y del filósofo trascendentalista Ralph Waldo Emerson en concreto; el propio James asistió a la facultad de Derecho de Harvard de 1862 a 1863 (aunque no se licenció); y toda la familia James se instaló en la zona de Boston en 1864: al principio en Ashburton Place, en Beacon Hill (no muy lejos de la casa de Olive Chancellor en Charles Street), y más tarde en Quincy Street, Cambridge, cerca del campus de Harvard y del monumento conmemorativo a la guerra que Ransom y Verena visitan en un momento crucial de la novela. James conocía Boston en profundidad. Entre 1870 y 1872, cuando rondaba los treinta, aburrido y recluido en Quincy Street después de una larga estancia en Europa, buscaba, según Edel, «cualquier cosa que pudiera aliviar su hastío por las noches»:

> Se aventuraba en reuniones y sesiones de espiritismo privadas, demostraciones de mesmerismo, conferencias de jóvenes y fervientes reformistas o discursos de editoras que defendían religiones nuevas, escuchando atentamente su torrente de oratoria fácil procedente de veladas culturales en tiendas de circos y salas de conferencias, que reflejaban el espíritu bienintencionado de Boston que seguía animando a los ciudadanos tras la abolición […] A un lector que muchos años más tarde le preguntó por la casa de Boston en la que se había inspirado para los aposentos de la señorita Birdseye en *Las bostonianas*, James le respondió que tenía presente una calle cerca de la vieja estación de Worcester y que «puedo oler la casa, por dentro, todavía».[20]

Del Sur, en cambio, James sabía muy poco: incluso en *La escena americana* se adentró solo hasta Richmond, Savannah y Charleston —nunca fue hacia el interior— antes de pasar al litoral atlántico de Florida. Tenía, al menos psicológicamente hablando, mucho más en común con Olive que con Basil: con ella compartía en concreto parte de la conciencia puritana de Nueva Inglaterra (idealista, moralmente quisquillosa, introvertida) que había sido dramatizada de forma muy gráfica por su gran predecesor, Nathaniel Hawthorne. Hay en Olive algo «muy moderno y profundamente desarrollado»; posee «las ventajas así como también las desventajas de un carácter nervioso» (capítulo III); tiene la costumbre de «no poder ver las cosas sencilla y claramente, sino de modo distorsionado, con relaciones perversas» (capítulo XVII); es «ansiosa y suspicaz», «vulnerable a las más insignificantes influencias» (capítulo XXXI). En realidad, James se acordó insistentemente del legado de Nueva Inglaterra/Boston en los años que precedieron a *Las bostonianas*, que fue escrita entre agosto de 1884 y abril de 1885. Su madre (a la que idealizaba en términos nada

feministas como la esposa y madre abnegada por excelencia) y su padre fallecieron en 1882, y tuvo que hacer dos viajes a Boston, en febrero (cuando ya estaba en Estados Unidos de visita) y en diciembre. A principios de 1883 visitó a unos amigos en Marion, Massachusetts, cerca de Cape Cod, el modelo de «Marmion» en la novela; a finales de 1883, su hermano Wilky también murió, un episodio que le trajo recuerdos de la guerra de Secesión. El breve estudio «Hawthorne» (1879) había permitido a James regresar a ese escritor en general y a *La granja de Blithedale* (1852) en particular, una novela sobre el idealismo de Boston y la «dispepsia hereditaria» de las mujeres de Nueva Inglaterra.[21] Además, «Hawthorne» fue recibido con hostilidad en América porque James presentó Nueva Inglaterra como una sociedad provinciana. Escribió «El punto de vista» en 1882: un relato que satirizaba la cultura americana y que obtuvo también una fría recepción. En 1884 escribió otro, «A New England Winter», en el que el héroe menciona hasta qué punto había quedado subordinado el «carácter masculino» en su patria. A finales de 1884, la hermana inválida de James, Alice, llegó a Inglaterra, donde vivió el resto de su vida manteniendo una relación de dependencia y celos con su amiga íntima Katherine Loring. En junio de 1883, revisó la famosa *Correspondencia* entre Thomas Carlyle y Emerson, en la que Emerson hablaba de la cuestión del progresismo radical. («Aquí estamos un poco exaltados con innumerables proyectos de reforma social —escribió a Carlyle desde Concord el 30 de octubre de 1840—. No hay un solo hombre aficionado a la lectura que no tenga una propuesta de una nueva sociedad en el bolsillo de su chaleco.»[22] En su ejemplar revisado, James escribió una sola palabra al lado de este pasaje: «reformadores».)[23]

Con Olive, James compartía una marcada formación en Nueva Inglaterra. También compartía con ella una homosexualidad latente, y esa es otra diferencia importantísima entre la novela descrita por James a J. R. Osgood y la que escribió. A Osgood le describió una mujer que se debatía entre el amor y la amistad. Para él, pintó a «una amiga íntima», aunque con una «apasionada admiración» por la chica sobre la que ha adquirido «una gran influencia». No sabemos hasta qué punto está escrito en clave, ni hasta qué punto se esperaba que Osgood lo entendiera al pie de la letra. (Cuesta imaginar a un editor de la década de 1880 que respondiera positivamente a un material sobre un lesbianismo reconocido.) Incluso cuando James continúa y escribe para sí, lo

hace hablando de «esas amistades entre mujeres que son tan habituales en Nueva Inglaterra», y que de vez en cuando eran el motivo de que las mujeres implicadas se fueran a vivir juntas (el denominado «matrimonio de Boston»). Es imposible, pues, saber qué parte veía James o quería que se viera de lo que escribiría. Tal vez la mención de la «decadencia del sentimiento sexual» introdujo la idea de asociar un matrimonio de Boston como los mencionados con algo más explícitamente «neurótico» y perturbador. Solo sabemos que la relación que finalmente surgió entre Olive y Verena es más que una amistad, al menos en lo que concierne a Olive, y que eso ejercitó la imaginación moral de James de una forma poderosa y ambivalente.[24]

Aunque James respalda las actitudes sexuales, maritales y políticas de Basil Ransom de forma explícita (si bien para nada en bloque), también simpatiza implícitamente con Olive Chancellor; de hecho, se identifica con ella. Estas dos figuras no solo luchan por la conciencia juvenil de Verena, sino también, en un sentido muy real, por la conciencia de James. Como hombre profundamente conservador que era, James tenía serias dudas sobre «la decadencia del sentimiento sexual»: la decadencia, en otras palabras, de la actitud sexual victoriana basada en una tolerancia caballerosa y paternalista del sexo débil. (El 6 de abril de 1909 escribió a un amigo sufragista: «Confieso que no ansío el *avènement* [es decir, *évènement*] de un multitudinario y abrumador electorado femenino, y no veo cómo un hombre en sus cabales puede ansiarlo».)[25] Y heredó una visión de la sociedad claramente hierática, elitista y cuasi aristocrática, una visión socavada bárbaramente por individuos de mala fama como Selah Tarrant y Matthias Pardon. De modo que percibimos toda su preocupación, su ira y su ingenio tras la retórica que Ransom utiliza con «los bostonianos» y su fe ciega en el progreso y la reforma. Además, está claro que Ransom no es un conservador pagado de sí mismo; sería un adversario mucho más fácil si así lo fuera. «Sabía que era un conservador ferviente», comenta James de Verena:

> pero no sabía que ser un conservador significara que una persona pudiera ser tan agresiva y despiadada. Pensaba que los conservadores eran personas obtusas y tercas, satisfechas de sí mismas, y satisfechas también con el orden social imperante; pero el señor Ransom no parecía estar más satisfecho con la realidad presente que con la que ella deseaba que existiera, y estaba dispuesto a decir sobre algunos de los que ella pensaba que militaban en las mismas filas que él cosas peores de lo que la joven consideraría justo decir sobre casi nadie. [capítulo XXXIII.]

Ransom no profesa una lealtad afable e irreflexiva a la alta sociedad, como la que Burrages representa; se siente tan extraño allí como Olive. (De hecho, Basil y Olive tienen algunas cosas en común, ideológicamente hablando. Al igual que Basil, Olive opina que su época es «decadente y desmoralizada»; para ella, por supuesto, solo «la influencia del gran elemento femenino» arreglaría la situación [capítulo XVI], mientras que para Basil el elemento femenino es la raíz del problema.) Él tampoco defiende la esclavitud: su resumen de esa institución no dejaba a Verena «margen a pensar que él era menos inflexible ante ese ejemplo particular de la imbecilidad humana de lo que era con cualquier otro» (capítulo XXXVIII). Pero se opone activamente a las fuerzas del progreso: «También él tenía una visión personal de las reformas, cuyo primer principio era el de reformar a los reformadores» (capítulo III). «Señor Ransom», ruega Verena desesperadamente durante una de sus cruciales entrevistas en Nueva York, «le puedo asegurar que esta es una época que comienza a tomar conciencia.» A lo que Ransom contesta desdeñosamente: «Eso es parte de un vocabulario hipócrita. Vivimos en una época de indecibles imposturas, como dice Carlyle» (capítulo XXXIV). Y habiendo visto lo que hemos visto (incluidas las tensiones dentro del grupo feminista y la sociedad intelectual insoportablemente afectada en la que se cobijan Olive y Verena durante el capítulo XX), nos inclinamos poderosamente a opinar lo mismo, incluso cuando la retórica de Basil vira bruscamente hacia el propio Carlyle:

> Toda la actual generación se ha afeminado; el tono masculino está desapareciendo de este mundo; vivimos en una era femenina, nerviosa, histérica, charlatana y estúpida, una era de frases vacías y falsas delicadezas, excesivas preocupaciones y sensibilidades enfermizas, y si no le ponemos un freno inmediato culminará en el reino de la mediocridad, el más insulso, pretencioso y anodino que haya existido jamás. [capítulo XXXIV.]

Desde luego, James contempla con mucha ironía las «ideas estrechas» de Ransom (capítulo XXXIV). Pero por más que llame a las opiniones de Ransom «herejías», la balanza de la novela se inclina claramente a favor del joven de Mississippi, al menos desde el punto de vista ideológico. James no es de ninguna manera, como podría hacernos creer, un simple reportero que registra los «iracundos términos» de Ransom (capítulo VII): él les da crédito y los respalda.

Por consiguiente, la auténtica crítica de Basil no es en absoluto ideológico-intelectual, pero no por eso es menos devastadora. Es el descubrimiento de que el amante de la novela victoriana descrita a Osgood no ama a la heroína: simplemente desea poseerla, tal vez sexualmente, y como un adorno en su casa (que todavía no tiene), pero sobre todo por razones de rivalidad y de pura antipatía hacia su prima del Norte y hacia todo lo que ella representa. Esta paz concreta (o reconstrucción) es simplemente guerra por otros medios: lo que Basil y la gente de su clase perdió ante la muralla de Charleston, él lo recuperará; «La ciudad de Boston puede irse al diablo» (capítulo XLII). Hay un momento crucial en el capítulo XXII de la novela en el que Basil considera por un momento casarse con la señora Luna: después de todo, ella tiene dinero, posee un atractivo convencional y salta a la vista que está interesada en él. Pero su rechazo no solo está totalmente ligado a su imagen mental de Verena, sino también a su imagen mental del Sur: «[…] sus peculiaridades sociales, la ruina acarreada por la guerra, las nobles familias empobrecidas […] del lado patético y del cómico». Su relación con Verena alcanza un momento crítico bajo el techo del Memorial Hall de Harvard, dedicado a los soldados caídos del Norte. La conquista de Verena será, al menos en parte, un ajuste de cuentas. Y así resulta ser. Al final de la novela, Olive prácticamente reconoce su derrota: «Haré cualquier cosa… seré abyecta… seré vil… ¡Morderé el polvo!» (capítulo LXII).

En verdad, Basil no es capaz de amar a nadie. Absorto en sí mismo como está, su visión de los demás es aguda pero superficial. Él ve enseguida que Olive, «esa muchacha pálida, de ojos de un verde claro, rasgos afilados y modales nerviosos era de una naturaleza evidentemente morbosa»; pero es el propio James quien tiene que intervenir para desarrollar esa observación. «Nada importante», comenta el narrador en el capítulo II, «hacía de la señorita Chancellor pensar que fuera morbosa; no era suficiente saber que una cierta parte de ella podría clasificarse dentro de los límites de esa condición. ¿Por qué era morbosa y de qué tipo era aquella morbosidad?». La respuesta es, por supuesto —y aquí vemos cómo se manifiesta la curiosidad «filosófica» y social de James—, que Olive es víctima de «la decadencia del sentimiento sexual»: una paradoja, una puritana tristona e introspectiva que ha rechazado el papel tradicional de las mujeres y no ha hallado nada con que sustituirlo.

Olive habla de la gente, pero detesta el contacto físico con ella. Mientras que el origen humilde de Verena le resulta fascinante, el de Pardon le parece repulsivo. «Dada su inmensa simpatía hacia las reformas, esperaba que los reformadores fueran un poco diferentes» (capítulo V): que la señora Farrinder cambiase de peinado, por ejemplo.

El carácter neurótico de Olive se manifiesta de un modo más cuestionable en sus sentimientos hacia Verena, quien ni siquiera es la primera joven de su clase por la que se interesa:

> Había dos o tres pálidas dependientas de comercio cuyo trato había intentado; pero parecía que tuvieran algún temor de ella, y aquellos intentos se habían desvanecido en la nada. Ella consideraba la situación de las jóvenes de una manera más trágica de lo que lo hacían estas; no lograban comprender qué deseaba de ellas, y siempre terminaban por estar odiosamente enredadas con algún Charlie. Charlie era siempre un joven de chaqueta blanca y cuello de cartón; en última instancia era por él por quien ellas se preocupaban sobre todo. Más les interesaba Charlie que el derecho a votar. [capítulo V.]

Tampoco es que esa «comunión de almas» (capítulo XI) sea muy saludable, pues obliga a Verena a renunciar, contenerse y abstenerse, cuando a ella le gustan los sombreros con abundantes plumas, pero eso solo es la mitad del problema. También tiene que ver con el interés sádico que despierta la anterior vida de privaciones de Verena a la rica y bien alimentada Olive: «[…] había una especie de ferocidad en la alegría con la que reflexionaba sobre el hecho de que esa criatura delicada había sufrido (¡si solo esa necesidad hubiera durado un poco más!) hambre» (capítulo XIV).[26] «Tú no has nacido para sufrir», le dice Olive a Verena una tarde en Nueva York, «has nacido para disfrutar» (capítulo XXX). El hecho de que ese comentario recuerde otro hecho antes por Basil («[…] Verena había sido creada para algo divinamente diferente… para una vida privada, para él, para el amor» [capítulo XXVIII]) es significativo: tanto Olive como Basil la persiguen con fines en última instancia egoístas. Otro hecho significativo es que cuando Olive hace ese comentario no tenemos forma de saber cómo debe interpretarse la palabra «disfrutar»: ¿se supone que Verena debe disfrutar de la vida o que ella debe ser disfrutada? Nadie llamaría a esto una relación saludable. Al menos en lo que respecta a Olive, es obsesiva, posesiva e instintiva con comportamientos pasivo-agresivos y de dependencia, y todo ello aflora de forma alarmante pero también triste en varios momentos culminantes del libro.

«Cuando como ahora eres tan encantadoramente dócil», parece decir el gesto de Olive en una ocasión, «¿cómo no voy a sentir terror de perderte?» (capítulo XXX).

Sea como fuere, Olive es la única persona de la novela que quiere a Verena o que le ofrece una sincera declaración de amor, aunque no tan explícitamente. «¡Olive!», salta Verena durante uno de los accesos de inseguridad de la mujer en relación con la llegada de un «Charlie» a su vida. «¡Eres una gran oradora! Podrías superarme con solo proponértelo.» «Puedo hablarte a ti, pero eso no constituye ninguna prueba. Hasta las mismas piedras de las calles, todas las cosas mudas de la naturaleza encontrarían una voz para hablarte» (capítulo XVII). A continuación hay un pasaje que saca a la luz las inquietantes contradicciones de su actitud hacia Verena. Después de intentar obligar a la joven a que renuncie a la idea del matrimonio en el capítulo XVI («No escuchar a ninguno de ellos, no dejarte nunca corromper…»), le remuerde la conciencia, y sin embargo, el miedo a perder a la chica a la que ama acaba superándola:

> Tienes que estar en un lugar seguro, tienes que salvarte; pero tu salvación no debe provenir del hecho de tener las manos atadas, sino del desarrollo de tu inteligencia. Debe derivar del poder ver las cosas por tu cuenta, sinceramente y con entera convicción, de la misma manera que yo las veo; de la sensación de que para tu trabajo la libertad es esencial, y que no ha de existir libertad para ti y para mí salvo en el no hacer lo que a menudo te van a proponer hacer… ¡y a mí nunca! […] ¡No hagas promesas, no hagas promesas! […] Preferiría que no las hagas. Pero no vayas a fallarme. Si me llegaras a fallar me moriría. [capítulo XVII.]

«La muchacha», comenta James lúgubremente, «estaba ya completamente bajo su influencia.» Y bajo ella sigue hasta que Ransom se la arranca en la demoledora culminación de la novela.

IV

Las bostonianas es especial porque no fue «aderezada» para la edición de Nueva York, por su humor y su fisicidad, por su compromiso directo con temas sociales y políticos y por la forma en que los dramatizó, y en último término por el grado de implicación de su autor y su concepto de sí mismo en el escenario y la acción de la novela. Pero el pasaje anterior hace pensar que su carácter excepcional se debe también a otra causa.

Ha sido considerada una comedia y una sátira, y es cierto. Pero también es una tragedia, y muy conmovedora. Aunque su frescura, su humor, su fisicidad y su relevancia política combinadas forman una novela particularmente accesible y disfrutable, también es una novela sobrecogedora e inquietante, no solo en el tratamiento deparado a Olive, sino también por lo que ella representa. (La señorita Birdseye es una figura importante a este respecto: erigida y echada por tierra ya que aparece casi intermitentemente.) La visión negativa de lo que Verena llama «el Corazón de la humanidad» (capítulo XXVIII) —la reforma, el progreso y el colectivismo liberal que parece un ingrediente tan esencial en la democracia moderna— ha hecho de ella una novela polémica hasta el día de hoy. Sobre ella flota un halo de escepticismo respecto a todo el proceso político: saludable dirán algunos; destructivo según otros. Y de ese modo, más que ninguna otra novela de James, nos recuerda la literatura de nuestro tiempo. *Las bostonianas* es una de las novelas más brillantes escritas en lengua inglesa, como F. R. Leavis señaló,[27] pero también es una de las más sombrías. En ninguna otra novela James reveló más de sí mismo, de su sociedad y de su época, así como de la condición humana, que se debate entre la necesidad ciega de progreso y el deseo de retener lo viejo. Se trata de una novela moderna extraordinariamente experimental, escrita por un hombre de valores conservadores. Es crítica con las personas con las que el autor se identificaba e indulgente con algunas actitudes hostiles hacia muchas parcelas del legado intelectual y personal de James. La fuerza de las contradicciones plasmadas en la novela es una garantía del placer que ofrece al lector.

RICHARD LANSDOWN

Cronología

1843 Henry James nace el 15 de abril en la ciudad de Nueva York, en el número 21 de Washington Place. Fue el segundo de los cinco hijos de Henry James (1811-1882), teólogo especulativo y pensador social (su padre, un estricto emprendedor, había amasado una fortuna estimada en tres millones de dólares, una de las más elevadas de Estados Unidos en aquella época), y de su esposa, Mary (1810-1882), hija de James Walsh, un comerciante neoyorquino de algodón de origen escocés.

1843-1845 Acompaña a sus padres a París y a Londres.

1845-1847 La familia de James regresa a Estados Unidos y se instala en Albany, Nueva York.

1847-1855 La familia se instala en la ciudad de Nueva York. James se educa con tutores y en escuelas privadas.

1855-1858 La familia viaja por Europa: Ginebra, Londres, París, Boulogne-sur-Mer. De regreso en Estados Unidos se instala en Newport, Rhode Island.

1859-1860 La familia vuelve a Europa: James asiste a la escuela científica y luego a la Academia (más tarde Universidad) de Ginebra. Aprende alemán en Bonn.
En septiembre de 1860 la familia regresa a Newport. James entabla amistad con el futuro crítico T. S. Perry (que recuerda que James «no dejaba de escribir

relatos, sobre todo relatos románticos») y el artista John La Farge.

1861-1863 Se lesiona la espalda mientras ayuda a extinguir un incendio en Newport y queda exento de prestar servicio en la guerra de Secesión (1861-1865).
En el otoño de 1862 ingresa en la facultad de Derecho de Harvard, donde estudiará durante un cuatrimestre. Comienza a enviar sus relatos a revistas.

1864 Su primer relato, «A Tragedy of Error», se publica en febrero de manera anónima en la revista *Continental Monthly.*
En mayo la familia se traslada al número 13 de Ashburton Place, Boston, Massachusetts.
En octubre James publica una reseña sin firmar en la *North American Review.*

1865 Su primer relato firmado, «Historia de un año», aparece en marzo en la revista *Atlantic Monthly*. Publica una crítica en el primer número de *The Nation* (Nueva York).

1866-1868 Continúa escribiendo reseñas y relatos.
En el verano de 1866 se hace amigo de W. D. Howells, novelista, crítico y editor influyente.
En noviembre de 1866 la familia se traslada al número 20 de Quincy Street, junto a Harvard Yard, en Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1869 Por motivos de salud viaja a Europa, donde conoce a John Ruskin, William Morris, Charles Darwin y George Eliot; también visita Italia y Suiza.

1870 Su queridísima prima Minny Temple muere en Estados Unidos en marzo.
En mayo James vuelve a Cambridge de mala gana, todavía afectado.

1871 Su primera novela corta, *Guarda y tutela*, aparece por entregas entre agosto y diciembre en la revista *Atlantic Monthly*.

1872-1874 Acompaña a su hermana inválida, Alice, y a su tía Catherine Walsh («tía Kate») a Europa en mayo de 1872. Escribe crónicas de viaje para *The Nation.* Entre octubre de 1872 y septiembre de 1874 pasa temporadas en París, Roma, Suiza, Homburg e Italia sin su familia.

En la primavera de 1874 comienza en Florencia su primera novela larga, *Roderick Hudson.*

En septiembre regresa a Estados Unidos.

1875 Publica en enero *Un peregrino apasionado y otros cuentos*, la primera de sus obras que apareció en forma de libro. Le siguieron *Transatlantic Sketches* (apuntes de viaje) y *Roderick Hudson*, en noviembre. Pasa seis meses en Nueva York, en el número 111 de la calle Veinticinco Este, y luego tres meses en Cambridge.

El 11 de noviembre llega a París, al número 29 de la rue de Luxembourg, como corresponsal para el *New York Tribune.*

En diciembre comienza una nueva novela, *El americano.*

1876 Conoce a Gustave Flaubert, Iván Turguénev, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, Guy de Maupassant y Émile Zola.

En diciembre se muda a Londres y se instala en el número 3 de Bolton Street, cerca de Piccadilly.

1877 Visita París, Florencia y Roma.

El americano se publica en mayo.

1878 Conoce a William Gladstone, Alfred Tennyson y Robert Browning.

En febrero se publica el primer libro de James en Londres, la colección de ensayos *French Poets and Novelists.*

La novela corta *Daisy Miller* aparece por entregas en *The Cornhill Magazine* durante el mes de julio, y *Harper's* la publica en noviembre en Estados Unidos,

afianzando así el renombre de James a ambos lados del Atlántico.
En septiembre publica *Los europeos* (novela).

1879 En diciembre publica *Confianza* (novela) y *Hawthorne* (estudio crítico).

1880 En diciembre publica *Washington Square* (novela).

1881 Regresa a Estados Unidos en octubre; visita Cambridge.
En noviembre publica *Retrato de una dama* (novela).

1882 Su madre muere en enero. Visita Nueva York y Washington D. C.
En mayo viaja a Inglaterra, pero en diciembre regresa a Estados Unidos a causa de la muerte de su padre.

1883 En verano vuelve a Londres.
En noviembre Macmillan publica su obra narrativa completa en catorce volúmenes.
En diciembre publica *Portraits of Places* (crónicas de viaje).

1884 Su hermana Alice se traslada a Londres y se instala cerca de James.
En septiembre publica *A Little Tour in France* (crónicas de viaje) y *Tales of Three Cities*; «El arte de la ficción», su importante proclama artística, aparece en *Longman's Magazine.*
Entabla amistad con R. L. Stevenson y Edmund Gosse. En una carta a su amiga estadounidense Grace Norton escribe: «Nunca me casaré […] Ya soy lo bastante feliz y lo bastante desgraciado tal como están las cosas».

1885-1886 Publica dos novelas por entregas: *Las bostonianas* y *La princesa Casamassima.*
El 6 de marzo de 1886 se muda a un piso en De Vere Gardens 34.

1887 Visita Florencia y Venecia durante la primavera y el verano. Prosigue su amistad (iniciada en 1880) con la novelista estadounidense Constance Fenimore Woolson.

1888 Publica *El eco* (novela), *Los papeles de Aspern* (novela corta) y *Partial Portraits* (crítica).

1889 Publica la colección de relatos *Una vida en Londres*.

1890 Publica *La musa trágica* (novela).

1891 La adaptación teatral de *El americano* se representa durante una corta temporada en Londres y provincias.

1892 En febrero publica *La lección del maestro* (colección de relatos).
En marzo muere en Londres Alice James.

1893 Publica tres volúmenes de relatos: *The Real Thing* (marzo), *La vida privada* (junio) y *The Wheel of Time* (septiembre).

1894 Mueren Constance Fenimore Woolson y R. L. Stevenson.

1895 La obra *Guy Domville* se estrena el 5 de enero en el Saint James Theatre y es recibida con abucheos y aplausos; James abandona durante años la dramaturgia.
Visita Irlanda. Se aficiona al ciclismo. Publica dos volúmenes de relatos: *Terminations* (mayo) y *Embarrassments* (junio).

1896 Publica *La otra casa* (novela).

1897 Publica dos novelas: *El expolio de Poynton* y *Lo que Maisie sabía*.
En febrero empieza a dictar sus obras, debido a problemas en la muñeca.

En septiembre alquila Lamb House, en Rye, Sussex.

1898 Se muda a Lamb House en junio. Entre sus vecinos de Sussex están los escritores Joseph Conrad, H. G. Wells y Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford).
En agosto publica *En la jaula* (novela corta).
Otra vuelta de tuerca, una historia de fantasmas incluida en *The Two Magics*, se convierte en octubre en su obra más popular desde *Daisy Miller*.

1899 En abril publica la novela *La edad ingrata*.
En agosto compra Lamb House en propiedad.

1900 Se afeita la barba.
En agosto publica una colección de relatos, *The Soft Side.*
Entabla amistad con la novelista estadounidense Edith Wharton.

1901 En febrero publica la novela *La fontana sagrada.*

1902 En agosto publica la novela *Las alas de la paloma.*

1903 En febrero publica la colección de relatos *Lo más selecto.*
En septiembre publica la novela *Los embajadores.*
En octubre publica la biografía *William Wetmore Story and his Friends.*

1904 En agosto viaja en barco a Estados Unidos, su primera visita en veintiún años. Pasa por Nueva Inglaterra, Nueva York, Filadelfia, Washington, el Sur, San Luis, Chicago, Los Ángeles y San Francisco.
En noviembre publica la novela *La copa dorada.*

1905 El presidente Theodore Roosevelt lo invita en enero a la Casa Blanca. Lo eligen miembro de la Academia Americana de las Artes y las Letras.

De vuelta en Lamb House en julio, comienza a revisar sus obras para la New York Edition, la edición estadounidense de sus obras completas: *The Novels and Tales of Henry James.*
En octubre publica *English Hours* (ensayos de viaje).

1906-1908 Selecciona, ordena, prologa y encarga ilustraciones para la New York Edition, publicada entre 1907 y 1909 en veinticuatro volúmenes.

1907 En enero publica *The American Scene* (ensayos de viaje).

1908 En marzo, producción de la obra *The High Bid* en Edimburgo.

1909 En octubre publica *Italian Hours* (ensayos de viaje). Tiene problemas de salud.

1910 En agosto viaja a Estados Unidos con su hermano William, quien muere una semana después de su regreso.
En octubre publica *The Finer Grain* (relatos).

1911 Vuelve a Inglaterra en agosto.
En octubre publica *La protesta* (novela adaptada a partir de la obra de teatro).
Comienza a trabajar en una autobiografía.

1912 En junio es investido doctor honoris causa por la Universidad de Oxford.
En octubre alquila un piso en el número 21 de Carlyle Mansions, en Cheyne Walk, Chelsea; padece de culebrilla (herpes zóster).

1913 En marzo publica *Un chiquillo y otros* (primer volumen de su autobiografía).
John Singer Sargent le pinta un retrato con motivo de su setenta cumpleaños (15 de abril).

1914 En marzo publica *Notes of a Son and Brother* (segundo volumen de su autobiografía).

Estalla en agosto la Primera Guerra Mundial; James se compromete fervientemente con la causa británica y ayuda a refugiados belgas y soldados heridos.

En octubre publica *Notes on Novelists*.

1915 Es nombrado presidente de honor del Cuerpo de Ambulancias de los Voluntarios Americanos.

En julio se hace ciudadano británico.

Escribe una serie de ensayos sobre la guerra (recogidos en *Within the Rim*, 1919) y el prólogo de *Letters from America* (1916), del poeta Rupert Brooke, fallecido el año antes.

El 2 de diciembre sufre un derrame cerebral.

1916 Recibe la Orden del Mérito en la ceremonia de las Condecoraciones de Año Nuevo.

Muere el 28 de febrero. Tras su funeral en la Vieja Iglesia de Chelsea, su cuñada se lleva clandestinamente las cenizas a Estados Unidos, donde son enterradas en la parcela familiar, en Cambridge.

Las bostonianas

LIBRO PRIMERO

I

—Olive bajará dentro de unos diez minutos; me pidió que se lo dijera. Unos diez minutos: esa es Olive. Ni cinco ni quince, pero tampoco diez exactamente, sino más bien nueve u once. No me pidió que le dijera que se siente feliz de verlo, porque no sabe si lo está o no, y por nada del mundo se expondría a decir algo impreciso. Si hay alguien honesto esa es Olive Chancellor; es la rectitud en persona. Nadie dice nada impreciso en Boston; la verdad es que no sé cómo tratar a esta gente. Bien, de cualquier manera estoy muy contenta de verlo.

Estas palabras fueron pronunciadas con aire voluble por una mujer rubia, regordeta y sonriente que entró en una angosta sala en la que un visitante que aguardaba desde hacía algunos minutos se encontraba inmerso en la lectura de un libro. El caballero no había siquiera necesitado sentarse para comenzar a interesarse en la lectura; al parecer había tomado el volumen de una mesa tan pronto como llegó, y, manteniéndose de pie, después de una sola mirada al apartamento, se había sumido en sus páginas. Puso a un lado el libro al acercarse la señora Luna, sonrió, le estrechó la mano y dijo como respuesta al último comentario de la dama:

—Usted ha sugerido que dice mentiras. Tal vez esa sea una.

—Oh, no, no hay de qué maravillarse en que me alegre su visita —respondió la señora Luna— si le digo que he pasado ya tres largas semanas en esta ciudad donde nadie miente.

—Sus palabras no me parecen demasiado elogiosas —dijo el joven—. Yo no pretendo mentir.

—Oh, cielos, ¿cuál es la ventaja entonces de ser un sureño? —preguntó la dama—. Olive me ha encargado de decirle que espera que se quede usted a comer. Y si lo ha

dicho es que verdaderamente lo espera. Está dispuesta a correr el riesgo.

—¿Tal como estoy? —preguntó el visitante, adoptando un aspecto más bien humilde.

La señora Luna lo miró de la cabeza a los pies, y sonrió ligeramente como si tuviera ante sí una larga columna de números que sumar. Y en efecto, Basil Ransom era muy alto, y su aspecto era tan duro y desalentador como una larga suma, a pesar del rostro cordial que inclinaba sobre la mensajera de su anfitriona, el cual, a pesar de su delgadez, tenía una profunda línea, una especie de arruga prematura a ambos lados de la boca. Era alto, delgado y vestía completamente de negro: el cuello de la camisa era bajo y ancho, y el triángulo de lino, un poco arrugado, que se mostraba por la abertura de su chaleco, estaba adornado por un alfiler ornamentado con una pequeña piedra roja. Fuera de esto, el joven tenía un aspecto pobre, tan pobre como podía parecer un joven con un rostro tan bello y ojos tan espléndidos. Los de Basil Ransom eran oscuros, profundos y brillantes; la cabeza tenía un aire de nobleza que posiblemente lo hacía parecer más alto; era una cabeza que hubiera sobresalido sobre una multitud tras la mesa de un juzgado o en una tribuna política, o hasta esculpida en una medalla de bronce. La frente era alta y amplia, y sus espesos cabellos oscuros estaban perfectamente cepillados; peinados sin raya, caían hacia atrás como la melena de un león. Estos elementos, especialmente los ojos, con su llama intensa, podían indicar en él un futuro de gran estadista americano; o, por otra parte, podían simplemente probar que procedía de Carolina o de Alabama. Era originario, en efecto, de Mississippi, y hablaba con el acento de aquella región. No me es posible reproducir con alguna combinación de sílabas ese simpático dialecto; pero el lector iniciado no tendrá dificultad en evocar el sonido, que en el caso presente no se asociaba con nada vulgar ni superficial. Este joven delgado, pálido, de color amarillento, con las ropas raídas, con su cabeza distinguida, los hombros de persona sedentaria, la brillante dureza de rasgos, su apariencia provinciana y distinguida, es, como representante de su sexo, el personaje más importante en mi relato. Él desempeñó un papel muy activo en los acontecimientos que me propongo narrar hasta cierto límite. Y sin embargo al lector que desee tener una imagen más completa del hombre y quiera leer con los sentidos más que con la razón, le aconsejaría no olvidar que prolongaba las consonantes y se comía las vocales, que incurría en elipsis e interpolaciones igualmente inesperadas, y que su

discurso estaba teñido de un sentimiento de amplitud y de pesadez, con algo de africano en sus ricos tonos bajos, algo que sugería las extensiones ilimitadas de los campos de algodón. La señora Luna se había preocupado en observar todo esto, pero vio solo una parte; de otro modo no habría respondido de un modo burlón a su pregunta:

—¿Acostumbra a vestir de modo diferente a como ahora? —La señora Luna asumía un tono familiar, intolerablemente familiar.

Basil Ransom enrojeció ligeramente. Luego dijo:

—Oh, sí, cuando como fuera llevo habitualmente conmigo una escopeta y un cuchillo de caza. —Y acarició con gesto vago su sombrero, un sombrero negro y blando con la copa muy baja y las alas inmensas y rígidas.

La señora Luna quiso saber qué estaba haciendo. Lo hizo sentar; le dio las más amplias seguridades de que su hermana lo esperaba de verdad, y que se sentiría tan mal como solo ella podía sentirse —pues debía saber que era de tipo fatalista— si él no accedía a quedarse a cenar. Era una pena inmensa que ella tuviera que salir en esos momentos; en Boston era difícil salvarse de las invitaciones. También Olive tenía que ir a otro lugar después de comer, pero a él no debía preocuparle eso, y, tal vez, hasta le gustaría acompañarla. No se trataba precisamente de una recepción, Olive no iba a fiestas; era una de esas tétricas reuniones a las que era tan afecta.

—¿A qué clase de reuniones se refiere? Habla usted como si fuera un encuentro de brujas en el Brocken.

—Bueno, eso es precisamente; se trata de reuniones de brujas y magos, médiums, espiritistas y radicales fervientes.

Basil Ransom se quedó perplejo; la luz amarillenta en sus ojos castaños se hizo más profunda.

—¿Quiere usted decir que su hermana es una ferviente radical?

—¿Una radical? Es un jacobino con ropa de mujer… es una nihilista. Todo lo que existe es malo, y ese tipo de cosas. Si va usted a almorzar con ella será mejor que lo sepa.

—¡Oh, cielos! —murmuró vagamente el joven, recostándose en la poltrona con los brazos cruzados. Miró a la señora Luna con una incredulidad inteligente. Era una mujer bastante hermosa; los cabellos rizados le caían como racimos de uvas; parecía que el

busto se abriría a cada momento debido a su vivacidad; y por debajo de los rígidos pliegues de su crinolina surgía un pie pequeño y gordezuelo, sostenido por un alto tacón. Era una mujer atractiva e impertinente, especialmente esto último. Él pareció considerar que era una lástima que ella hubiera dicho lo que había dicho; pero pareció perderse en esta consideración, o, de cualquier manera, no dijo nada durante un buen rato, mientras sus ojos vagaban sobre la señora Luna, y probablemente tratara de adivinar qué tipo de doctrina representaba, ya que parecía compartir muy poco los puntos de vista de su hermana. Muchas cosas le resultaban extrañas a Basil Ransom. Boston parecía estar especialmente colmado de sorpresas, y él era un hombre a quien le gustaba comprender. La señora Luna se calzaba los guantes; Ransom no había visto ningunos tan largos como aquellos; le recordaban las medias de una mujer y se preguntó cómo los podría sostener sin ligas en los hombros—. Bueno, supongo que sí, que es mejor saberlo —concluyó al final.

—¿Que es mejor saber qué?

—Bueno, que la señorita Chancellor es todo lo que usted dice. A fin de cuentas fue educada en la ciudad de las reformas.

—Oh, no es asunto de la ciudad sino de Olive Chancellor. Ella reformaría el sistema solar si pudiera echarle mano. Lo reformará a usted si no tiene cuidado. En este estado la he encontrado a mi regreso de Europa.

—¿Ha estado usted en Europa? —preguntó Ransom.

—*Merci*, sí; ¿y usted?

—No, yo no he estado en ningún lugar. ¿Y su hermana?

—También; pero permaneció allá solo una hora o dos. Detesta Europa; de buena gana la aboliría. ¿No sabía usted que yo había estado en Europa? —continuó la señora Luna en el tono ligeramente agraviado de la mujer que descubre los límites de su prestigio.

Ransom consideró que podía responder que hasta hacía cinco minutos ni siquiera tenía idea de su existencia; pero recordó que no era ese el modo en que un caballero del Sur debía hablar a las damas, y se contentó con decir que debía perdonarle su ignorancia beocia (le gustaban las frases elegantes); que él vivía en una parte del país donde no pensaban demasiado en Europa y que siempre había creído que ella tenía su

domicilio en Nueva York. Esta última observación fue lanzada al azar, ya que, por supuesto, jamás había pensado en la señora Luna. Su deshonestidad, sin embargo, solo lo expuso a peligros mayores.

—Si pensaba usted que vivía en Nueva York, ¿por qué entonces nunca me hizo una visita? —preguntó la dama.

—Bueno, ve usted, no salgo mucho, excepto cuando voy a la corte.

—¿Se refiere usted a la corte de justicia? Todo el mundo tiene aquí una profesión. ¿Es usted muy ambicioso? Tiene el aspecto de serlo.

—Sí, mucho —respondió Basil Ransom, esbozando una sonrisa, con esa extraña inflexión femenina con la que un caballero del sur pronuncia aquel adverbio.

La señora Luna explicó que había vivido en Europa durante varios años, desde que había muerto su marido, pero que había vuelto al país hacía un mes con su hijo pequeño, lo único con que contaba en el mundo, y estaba visitando a su hermana, quien, por supuesto, era la persona más próxima a ella después de su hijo.

—Aunque no es la misma cosa —dijo—. Olive y yo estamos en desacuerdo en casi todo.

—Lo que no sucede entre usted y su hijo —comentó el joven.

—Oh, no, jamás tengo una diferencia con Newton.

Y la señora Luna añadió que ahora que había vuelto no sabía qué debía hacer. Eso era lo peor de haber vuelto; era como volver a nacer, y a su edad tenía que comenzar desde el principio. Ni siquiera sabía por qué había vuelto. Había personas que querían que no pasara el invierno en Boston; pero ella no podía considerar eso seriamente, por lo menos sabía a qué no había venido. Tal vez alquilara una casa en Washington, ¿había oído hablar de aquella pequeña ciudad? La habían inventado mientras ella estaba fuera. Por otra parte, Olive no la quería tener en Boston y no se había preocupado de ocultarlo. Eso era lo bueno de Olive; nunca se ceñía a las formas.

Basil Ransom se levantó mientras la señora Luna hacía esta última declaración, pues una joven había entrado en la habitación y se había detenido tan pronto como le llegaron al oído aquellas últimas palabras. Se quedó observando, consciente y más bien severamente, al señor Ransom; una sonrisa débil apareció en sus labios; era lo suficientemente perceptible como para iluminar la natural gravedad de su rostro. Se la

hubiera podido comparar con un débil rayo de luna que ilumina las paredes de una prisión.

—Si eso fuera verdad —dijo—, no tendría que decirle que me desagrada mucho haberle hecho esperar.

Tenía una voz de tono bajo y agradable —una voz cultivada—, y extendió una mano delgada y blanca al visitante, quien declaró con cierta solemnidad (se sentía culpable de participar en las indiscreciones de la señora Luna) que se sentía intensamente feliz de conocerla. Observó que la mano de la señorita Chancellor era fría y blanda; ella solo la había dejado entre las suyas, sin ejercer la menor presión. La señora Luna le explicó a su hermana que su libertad de lenguaje se debía al hecho de estar con un pariente, aunque, en realidad, no parecía saber mucho sobre ellas. No creía que hubiera oído hablar antes de ella, la señora Luna, aunque lo pretendiera, con su galantería de hombre del Sur. Ahora debía marcharse a una comida, había visto que el carruaje la esperaba, y en su ausencia Olive podía darle la versión que mejor le pareciera.

—Ya le he dicho que eres una radical, ahora tú debes decirle, si quieres, que soy una nueva Jezabel. Trata de reformarlo; una persona de Mississippi con toda seguridad no tiene una sola idea correcta. Yo volveré muy tarde; iremos después al teatro, por eso vamos a comer temprano. Adiós, señor Ransom —continuó la señora Luna, envolviéndose en una capa de plumas blancas que hacía resaltar su tez nívea—. Espero que se quede acá una temporada, para que pueda juzgarnos por sí mismo. Me gustaría mucho que conociera a Newton; es un chico de naturaleza noble y quisiera que usted me aconsejara sobre él. ¿Solo permanecerá hasta mañana? ¿Por qué? ¿Por qué tanta prisa? Bueno, recuerde ir a visitarme en Nueva York; pasaré seguramente allí una parte del invierno. Le mandaré una nota; no lo dejaré escapar. No, no salga; mi hermana tiene ahora la preferencia. Olive, ¿por qué no lo llevas a tu convención feminista? —El tono familiar de la señora Luna se extendía también a su hermana; le hizo notar a la señorita Chancellor que parecía haberse vestido como para hacer un viaje por mar—. Por fortuna no tengo opiniones que me impidan ponerme un vestido de noche —declaró desde el umbral de la puerta—. ¡Hay que ver la cantidad de tiempo que dedican a la ropa las personas que temen ser consideradas frívolas!

II

Si esa mucha o poca consideración se dirigía a los resultados, lo cierto es que la señorita Chancellor no merecía tal reproche. Su vestimenta consistía en un simple vestido negro, sin ningún adorno, y sus cabellos lisos, descoloridos, estaban sujetos tan cuidadosamente como los de la hermana habían sido dejados en libertad. Se había sentado inmediatamente, y mientras la señora Luna hablaba ella mantenía los ojos fijos en el suelo, mirando aun menos en dirección a Basil Ransom que hacia aquella mujer de tantas palabras. El joven, por consiguiente, pudo observarla a su gusto; y advirtió que estaba agitada, pero que trataba de no demostrarlo. Se preguntó el porqué de aquella agitación, sin prever que en el futuro iba a descubrir que la naturaleza de la señorita Chancellor era equiparable a la de un velero en medio de un mar tempestuoso. Aun después de que su hermana hubiera abandonado el salón, seguía sentada en el mismo lugar con la mirada ausente, como si hubiera un encantamiento que le impidiera alzarla. Debo confiarle al lector, a quien en el curso de nuestra historia me veré obligado a impartir mucha información secreta, que la señorita Chancellor era víctima de ataques de tremenda timidez, durante los cuales no era capaz ni siquiera de sostener su propia mirada ante un espejo. Una de esas rachas la había poseído en aquel momento sin ninguna causa evidente, aunque desde luego la señora Luna había agravado la situación con sus impertinentes comentarios. Nadie en el mundo podía ser tan impertinente como la señora Luna; su hermana la hubiera odiado por ello de no haberse prohibido esa emoción cuando se dirigía a un solo individuo. Basil Ransom poseía una inteligencia de primera clase, pero era consciente de las limitaciones de su experiencia. Se mantenía en guardia contra generalizaciones que podían resultar apresuradas, pero había adoptado dos o tres que le servían en su calidad de caballero recientemente

admitido en la sociedad de Nueva York y a cargo de una clientela. Una de ellas consistía en aceptar que la división más sencilla que se puede hacer del género humano es entre personas que toman las cosas en serio y personas que las toman a la ligera. Muy pronto se dio cuenta de que la señorita Chancellor pertenecía a la primera categoría. Eso estaba grabado tan claramente en aquel rostro delicado que él sintió una piedad indefinida por ella aun antes de que hubieran cambiado veinte palabras. El joven, en cambio, por naturaleza, tomaba las cosas a la ligera; si se había visto obligado a adoptar actitudes formales últimamente, había sido después de maduras reflexiones y obligado por las circunstancias. Pero esa muchacha pálida, de ojos de un verde claro, rasgos afilados y modales nerviosos era de una naturaleza evidentemente morbosa; era tan claro como el día que aquella joven poseía una naturaleza morbosa. El pobre Ransom se dijo esto como si hubiera hecho un gran descubrimiento; pero en realidad nunca había sido tan «beocio» como en aquel momento. Nada importante hacía de la señorita Chancellor pensar que fuera morbosa; no era suficiente saber que una cierta parte de ella podría clasificarse dentro de los límites de esa condición. ¿Por qué era morbosa y de qué tipo era aquella morbosidad? Ransom se hubiera sentido feliz si hubiera podido penetrar en la zona necesaria para explicar ese misterio. Las mujeres que hasta entonces había conocido pertenecían casi todas al dulce clima del Sur, y no ocurría a menudo encontrar en ellas aquella tendencia por él descubierta (e inmediatamente condenada) en la hermana de la señora Luna. A él le gustaban así, que no pensaran demasiado, que no sintieran ninguna responsabilidad por el gobierno del mundo, cosa que estaba seguro sentía la señorita Chancellor. Le gustaba que llevaran una vida privada y pasiva, que no tuvieran ningún sentimiento fuera de ella, y dejaran la vida pública al sexo de piel más dura. Ransom se complacía con la visión de ese remedio; debemos repetir que era muy provinciano.

Estas consideraciones no se le presentaban de un modo tan definido como he escrito aquí; estaban resumidas en el sentimiento de vaga compasión que la figura de la prima excitaba en su mente y que, sin embargo, iba acompañado de un vibrante rechazo a conocerla mejor, sobre todo, al serle evidente que con una cara como la suya debía ser una persona notable. Le produjo pena, pero se dio cuenta al instante de que nadie podría ayudarla; eso era lo que hacía que su situación fuera trágica. Ransom había

dejado las tristes tierras del Sur, que pesaban sobre su corazón, para hacer una carrera y no en busca de tragedias; por lo menos no quería que lo persiguieran fuera de su oficina de Pine Street. Rompió el silencio después de la salida de la señora Luna con uno de los corteses discursos que las vencidas regiones del Sur podían todavía sugerir, y enseguida se encontró conversando bastante a gusto con su anfitriona. Aunque Ransom se había dicho que nadie la podría ayudar, el efecto de la voz de él la hizo eliminar toda timidez: su gran ventaja (y ella se lo había propuesto para triunfar en su carrera) era que en ciertas circunstancias se podía volver repentinamente audaz. Se sintió segura al advertir que su huésped era una persona peculiar; por su manera de hablar no le extrañaría que hubiera combatido del lado de la Confederación. Nunca había encontrado a un personaje tan exótico, y ella siempre se sentía más cómoda en presencia de algo extraño. Eran las cosas cotidianas de la vida las que la llenaban de una rabia silenciosa; y eso era bastante natural, ya que según su modo de concebir las cosas casi todo lo que era ordinario era también malvado. Por eso no tuvo ninguna dificultad en preguntarle si se quedaría a cenar, esperaba que Adeline le hubiera transmitido su invitación. Se hallaba arriba con Adeline cuando le entregaron la tarjeta de visita de Ransom, y fue una inspiración repentina y del todo anormal la que la llevó a hacer este (para ella) supremo favor; nada, en efecto, más lejano de sus costumbres normales que el atender a solas, en el comedor, a un caballero que jamás había visto.

Era la misma clase de impulso que la había llevado a escribirle a Basil Ransom, en la primavera, después de haberse enterado accidentalmente de que había viajado al Norte y que pretendía ejercer su profesión en Nueva York. Su naturaleza le exigía buscar nuevos deberes que cumplir, y apelar a su conciencia para imponerse tareas nuevas. Este vigilante órgano, seriamente consultado, le había recordado que él era el retoño de la antigua oligarquía esclavista, la cual, por lo que recordaba su viva memoria, había sumergido al país en un mar de sangre y lágrimas. Le había también recordado, como consecuencia de tales hechos abominables, que él no representaba un objeto digno de ser protegido por una persona como ella, cuyos dos hermanos, sus únicos hermanos, habían dado la vida por la causa del Norte. Pero asimismo le había también hecho rememorar que también él, por su parte, había sufrido muchas privaciones y que, además, había combatido y ofrecido por la causa su propia vida,

aunque esta, después de todo, no le había sido arrancada. No podía impedirse admirar con pasión y con una especie de tierno sentimiento de envidia a quien había tenido la fortuna de una oportunidad semejante. La aspiración más secreta, más sagrada de su naturaleza, era la de poder tener un día una fortuna semejante: ser una mártir, poder morir por algo digno. Basil Ransom había sobrevivido, pero ella sabía que al sobrevivir había tenido experiencias amargas. Había contemplado la ruina de su familia: habían perdido sus esclavos, sus propiedades, amigos y conocidos, la casa; había debido saborear todas las crueldades de la derrota. Durante algún tiempo había tratado de hacerse cargo de la plantación, pero se había rendido bajo el peso aplastante de las deudas y no había soñado sino en encontrar un trabajo que le permitiera trasladarse a un lugar frecuentado por seres humanos. El estado de Mississippi le parecía el estado de la desesperación; así que entregó los restos del patrimonio familiar a su madre y a su hermana, y, casi con treinta años de edad, había llegado por primera vez a Nueva York, con la ropa de su provincia, con cincuenta dólares en el bolsillo y un condenado apetito en el corazón.

Que aquel incidente le había revelado al joven su ignorancia de muchas cosas, solo, sin embargo, para hacerle que se confesara a sí mismo, después de un primer ímpetu de furia, que había entrado en el juego y que permanecería allí hasta ganarlo, eran cosas que Olive Chancellor no podía conocer; lo que a ella le bastaba es que se hubiera recuperado, como dicen los franceses, había aceptado los hechos reales, había admitido que el Norte y el Sur eran un solo e indivisible organismo político. Su parentesco —el de los Chancellor y los Ransom— no era muy próximo; era de esa categoría que uno puede tomar o dejar, a voluntad. Se trataba de la rama femenina de la familia, como le había escrito Basil Ransom al responder a su carta con una gran abundancia de expresiones delicadas y formales; había hablado como si se tratara de casas reinantes. Había sido la madre de Olive quien se había interesado por la suerte de la familia; solo el temor de parecer demasiado protectora en relación con personas caídas en desgracia le había impedido escribir a Mississippi. Si hubiera sido posible enviarle dinero a la señora Ransom, o aunque solo fuera vestidos, lo habría hecho de muy buena gana; pero no tenía medios para saber cómo hubiera sido recibida tal proposición. Para la época en que Basil fue al Norte, tomando, por así decirlo, la

iniciativa, ya la señora Chancellor había muerto; así las decisiones habían recaído enteramente sobre Olive, que vivía sola en la pequeña casa de Charles Street (Adeline estaba en Europa).

Sabía lo que hubiera hecho su madre, y eso la ayudó en su decisión, pues su madre siempre elegía las soluciones más positivas. Olive tenía miedo de todo, pero su miedo mayor era el de tener miedo. Deseaba inmensamente ser generosa, ¿y cómo poder ser generosa a menos que se corriera algún riesgo? Había elegido como sistema de vida la norma por la que si se presentaba un riesgo debía asumirlo; y sufrió frecuentes humillaciones al encontrarse, después de todo, a salvo. Estaba perfectamente a salvo después de haberle escrito a Basil Ransom, y era en verdad difícil imaginarse qué otra cosa podría haber hecho él fuera de agradecerle su invitación (en términos excepcionalmente superlativos), y asegurarle que la visitaría en la primera ocasión que sus negocios (comenzaba a tener unos cuantos) lo llevaran a Boston. Ahora había llegado para dar fe de su voto de gratitud, y tampoco esto bastó para darle a la señorita Chancellor la sensación de haber corrido un peligro. Ella había advertido (a la primera mirada) que él no consideraba desde un punto de vista mundano cosas que para ella eran un principio que desafiar. Era demasiado simple —demasiado impregnado de Mississippi— para eso; se sentía casi desilusionada. Con seguridad ella no había esperado que fuera a asombrarlo haciendo algunas declaraciones nada femeninas (la señorita Chancellor aborrecía esa expresión tanto como la contraria); pero tuvo el presentimiento de que Ransom sería demasiado bondadoso, primitivo hasta ese grado. De todo lo existente en el mundo lo que más amaba era discutir (aunque el porqué es difícil de imaginar, pues siempre le costaba lágrimas, jaquecas, un día o dos en la cama, emociones agudas), y era muy posible que Basil Ransom no tuviera ningún interés en discutir. No hay nada más desagradable que esa indiferencia, cuando la gente no está de acuerdo con los principios de uno. Y que él estuviera de acuerdo con sus principios era lo que menos podía esperar. ¿Cómo iba a estar de acuerdo con ella un oriundo de Mississippi? De haber pensado que estaría de acuerdo con ella, ni siquiera le hubiese escrito.

III

Después de decirle que si lo aceptaba tal como iba vestido él se sentiría muy feliz de comer con ella, la señorita Chancellor se excusó un momento y fue a dar órdenes al comedor. El joven, una vez solo, miró a su alrededor: los dos salones pequeños que, por estar comunicados, formaban evidentemente un solo ambiente, y se dirigió hacia las ventanas posteriores desde las que se veía el río, ya que la señorita Chancellor tenía la fortuna de habitar en aquel lado de Charles Street desde el que se puede contemplar el crepúsculo vespertino en un horizonte interrumpido a intervalos con postes de madera, mástiles de barcos solitarios, chimeneas de sucias fábricas sobre una extensión salobre de carácter irregular, demasiado grande para ser un río, y demasiado pequeña para una bahía. La vista le pareció muy pintoresca, aunque en la penumbra del crepúsculo lo único que se podía distinguir fuera una línea amarilla al oeste, una superficie de agua oscura y el reflejo de las luces eléctricas que habían comenzado a aparecer en la fachada de una hilera de casas. Estas impresionaron a Ransom por su arquitectura, extremadamente moderna, dominando la laguna desde un embarcadero a la izquierda, hecho de piedras amontonadas burdamente. Consideró que aquel panorama, contemplado desde una casa en la ciudad, era casi romántico, y de allí regresó hacia el interior de la habitación (iluminada por una lámpara que la camarera encargada de la limpieza del salón había colocado sobre una mesa mientras él permanecía en la ventana) como hacia algo que tuviera el poder de alegrarlo e interesarlo todavía más. El sentimiento artístico de Basil Ransom no había sido cultivado en alto grado; y ni siquiera (aunque había pasado los primeros años de su vida como hijo de una rica familia) su concepción del bienestar material era muy precisa; consistía sobre todo en la vista de abundantes cigarros y brandy y agua y periódicos y una mecedora de mimbre

con la inclinación correcta, para poder extender las piernas. A pesar de todo le parecía que nunca había visto una habitación tan íntima como ese extraño salón en forma de corredor, cuya propietaria era su nuevo descubrimiento; nunca se había visto en la presencia de una intimidad tan bien organizada y de tantos objetos que hablaban de los hábitos y gustos de sus propietarios. La mayor parte de las personas a las que había conocido carecían de gustos personales; tenían algunos hábitos, pero eran de un género que no exigía toda aquella parafernalia. Aún no había estado en muchas casas de Nueva York, y nunca antes había visto tantos accesorios. El carácter general del lugar le impresionó como bostoniano. Todo en conjunto respondía, en efecto, a la idea que se había hecho de la ciudad de Boston. Había oído decir siempre que Boston estaba habitada por gente culta, y ahora veía tal cultura en las mesas y sofás de la señorita Chancellor, en los libros colocados en todas partes, en pequeños estantes (como si los libros fueran pequeñas estatuas), en las fotografías y en las acuarelas que tapizaban las paredes, en las cortinas que pendían como rígidos festones a los lados de las puertas. Observó algunos de los libros y se dio cuenta de que su prima conocía el alemán y la impresión de importancia de tal fenómeno (como síntoma de superioridad) no disminuyó por el hecho de que también él había estudiado aquella lengua (por saber que contenía una amplia literatura jurídica) durante el período árido y vacío del verano pasado en la plantación. Era prueba de una modestia natural inherente a Basil Ransom, que el principal efecto al observar los libros alemanes de su prima fuese reflexionar sobre la energía característica de la gente del Norte. Lo había advertido muchas veces antes, y se había ya dicho que debía contar con ese hecho. Pero solo después de muchas experiencias descubrió que pocos norteños, en lo más secreto de su alma, eran tan enérgicos como él. Muchas otras personas habían hecho ese descubrimiento antes que él. Sabía muy poco de la señorita Chancellor; había ido a visitarla solo porque ella se lo había pedido por escrito; por su propia cuenta jamás hubiera pensado en ir a buscarla y hasta ese momento no había encontrado a nadie en Nueva York que le pudiera proporcionar informes sobre ella. Por eso solo podía suponer que fuera una mujer joven y rica; una casa como aquella, amueblada en tal estilo, para una soltera tranquila, significaba que debía contar con una renta considerable. ¿Cuánto?, se preguntó; ¿cinco mil, diez mil, quince mil dólares al año? Para nuestro joven la menor

de esas cifras constituía una fortuna. No es que fuera de índole mercenaria, pero tenía un inmenso deseo de triunfar, y había reflexionado más de una vez en que un capital moderado significaba una ayuda para el triunfo. En sus días juveniles había visto uno de los más grandes fracasos que recuerda la historia, un inmenso *fiasco* nacional, y eso había impreso en su alma una profunda aversión a todo lo que fuera inefectivo. Pensó, mientras esperaba que volviera a aparecer su anfitriona, que esta no se había casado, y que era, además, rica; que, aunque era una mujer sociable (como testimoniaba su carta), también era una mujer soltera; y por un momento tuvo la idea fantástica de convertirse en socio de una empresa tan floreciente. Trabó los dientes cuando pensó en los contrastes del conjunto humano; este acogedor nido femenino le hacía más aguda la sensación de carecer de casa y de sostén. Tal estado de ánimo, sin embargo, podía ser solo momentáneo, porque era consciente, en el fondo, de que poseía un estómago que toda la cultura de Charles Street no habría podido llenar.

Más tarde, cuando volvió su prima y pasaron juntos al comedor, donde se sentó frente a ella en una pequeña mesa decorada con un ramillete de flores en el centro, en una posición desde la cual veía otro panorama, a través de una ventana donde las cortinas, por indicación de ella, no habían sido corridas (y ella le hizo notar que lo había hecho en su beneficio), el panorama del oscuro cauce del río con manchas de luz aquí y allá; en ese momento, repito, le hubiera parecido natural decirse a sí mismo que nada en el mundo lo lograría inducir a hacerle la corte a semejante tipo de mujer. Varios meses después, en Nueva York, en una conversación con la señora Luna, a quien estaba destinado a frecuentar bastante, aludió incidentalmente a aquella cena, al puesto que su hermana le había asignado en la mesa y a la observación con que le había hecho notar las ventajas de aquel asiento.

—Eso es lo que en Boston consideran ser una persona «atenta» —dijo la señora Luna—; concederle a uno la vista de la Back Bay (¿no es un nombre detestable?), y atribuirse el mérito de haber dispensado esa merced.

Esto, sin embargo, ocurriría en el futuro; en aquel momento lo que Basil Ransom percibió fue que la señorita Chancellor era una mujer predestinada a la soltería. Tal era su condición, su destino; nada podía estar escrito más claramente. Existen mujeres solteras por accidente y otras por propia elección, pero Olive Chancellor era una mujer

ajena al matrimonio por todas las implicaciones de su persona. Era soltera como Shelley era un poeta lírico, o como el mes de agosto es agobiante. Era tan esencialmente célibe que Ransom comenzó a pensar en ella como si fuera una vieja, aunque al examinarla detenidamente (como él mismo se dijo) le resultó evidente que apenas tenía unos cuantos años más que él. No le desagradó, había sido muy cordial; pero, poco a poco, le comenzó a producir una sensación irritante, el sentimiento de que uno jamás se hallaría a gusto con una mujer que tomaba las cosas tan en serio. Se le ocurrió que tal vez por tomar las cosas tan en serio, ella se había propuesto conocerlo; por su excesivo celo y no por ser una mujer cordial; tenía siempre ante sus ojos —¡y qué ojos extraordinarios eran aquellos!— no un placer, sino una obligación. Por su parte ella debía de esperar que él también fuera serio; pero no podía serlo, en la vida privada le resultaba imposible. Estar en privado consistía precisamente para Basil Ransom lo que llamaba «dejar sueltas las riendas». A medida que la fue conociendo fue dejando de parecerle tan sencilla como le resultó en un principio; el joven de Mississippi poseía la suficiente cultura como para percibir su refinamiento. Su tez blanca tenía un aspecto singular, como si estuviera pegada sobre la cara; sus rasgos, aunque agudos e irregulares tenían una delicadeza que indicaba una educación refinada. Su perfil tenía algo de perverso, pero nada de insignificante. El curioso tono de sus ojos era vivaz; cuando se volvía hacia uno producía vagamente el efecto de un destello de hielo verde. Su cuerpo carecía absolutamente de atractivos, y presentaba una apariencia de frialdad. A pesar de todo, había en su aspecto algo muy moderno y profundamente desarrollado; tenía todas las ventajas así como también las desventajas de un carácter nervioso. Constantemente sonrió a su huésped, desde el principio hasta el fin de la cena, y aunque él hizo algunos comentarios que pensó que podían resultarle divertidos jamás la vio reír. Más tarde se dio cuenta de que era una mujer sin risa. La jovialidad, si es que alguna vez la visitaba, debía de ser muda. Solo en una ocasión, en el curso de su posterior conocimiento, la oyó reír; y aquel sonido permaneció vibrando en el oído de Ransom, como uno de los más extraños que había oído en su vida.

La señorita Chancellor le hizo infinidad de preguntas, sin añadir ningún comentario a sus respuestas, que solo le servían para reiniciar otra serie de interrogantes. En aquel momento la timidez la había abandonado definitivamente. Se sentía lo suficientemente

segura como para permitirse desear que él se diera cuenta del gran interés que suscitaba en ella. ¿Qué era lo que la hacía interesarse en él?, se preguntaba Ransom. No podía pensar que fuera de la misma clase que ella; él era consciente de llevar una vida bohemia en Nueva York; bebía cerveza en las tabernas, no trataba con damas, y tenía relaciones con una actriz de variedades. Seguramente si ella lo conociera mejor desaprobaría su vida, aunque, por supuesto, él no mencionaría nunca a la actriz, ni tampoco, si no era necesario, la cerveza. La concepción que Ransom tenía del vicio se constreñía a una serie de casos especiales, de accidentes explicables. No le importaba demasiado aquello; si formaba parte del carácter de los bostonianos ser tan inquisitivos, él se mostraría hasta el final como un cortés caballero de Mississippi. Podía hablarle de Mississippi todo lo que ella quisiera; no le importaba decirle hasta qué punto las viejas ideas estaban extinguidas en el Sur. No lo iba a entender ella mejor por eso; la señorita Chancellor no hubiera podido comprender lo poco que los puntos de vista particulares de él se habían modificado por una admisión tan insignificante. Lo que su hermana le había dicho sobre su manía de reformar el mundo le había dejado a Ransom en la boca una especie de mal sabor; de cualquier modo sintió que si ella profesaba la religión del humanitarismo —Basil Ransom había leído a Comte, había leído todo— nunca lograría comprenderlo. También él tenía una visión personal de las reformas, cuyo primer principio era el de reformar a los reformadores. Cuando se acercaban al fin de aquella cena que, a pesar de todas las latentes incompatibilidades, había transcurrido brillantemente, ella le dijo que después de cenar tendría que abandonarlo, a menos que deseara acompañarla. Se trataba de una pequeña reunión en casa de una amiga, que había invitado a unas cuantas personas «interesadas en las nuevas ideas» para escuchar a la señora Farrinder.

—Oh, gracias —dijo Basil Ransom—. ¿Es una fiesta? Desde que Mississippi se unió a la Secesión no he estado en una sola fiesta.

—No, la señorita Birdseye no ofrece fiestas. Es una asceta.

—Bueno, de cualquier manera ya hemos cenado —respondió Ransom, riendo.

La anfitriona permaneció silenciosa durante un momento, con los ojos en el suelo. En aquel momento parecía hacer un gran esfuerzo por elegir una entre las muchas cosas

que podría decir, todas tan importantes que la elección se volvía algo en verdad muy arduo.

—Pienso que pueda interesarle —comentó ella, por fin— asistir a una discusión, si es que le agradan. Tal vez no estará usted de acuerdo —añadió, dejando caer sobre él su extraña mirada.

—Tal vez no esté de acuerdo en todos los puntos —dijo Ransom sonriendo y palmeándose una pierna.

—¿No le preocupa a usted el progreso humano? —continuó la señorita Chancellor.

—No lo sé… Nunca lo he visto. ¿Podría usted mostrarme alguno?

—Puedo mostrarle un esfuerzo honesto hacia él. Esto es de todo de lo que se puede estar seguro. Pero no tengo la certeza de que usted sea digno de ello.

—¿Es algo en verdad muy bostoniano? Me gustaría conocerlo —dijo Basil Ransom.

—Existen también movimientos en otras ciudades. La señora Farrinder viaja por todas partes. Es posible que hable esta noche.

—La señorita Farrinder, ¿la célebre…?

—Sí, la célebre; la gran apóstol de la emancipación de las mujeres. Es una gran amiga de la señorita Birdseye.

—¿Y quién es la señorita Birdseye?

—Es una de nuestras celebridades. Es la mujer que más ha trabajado en el mundo, creo yo, por toda clase de reformas inteligentes. Me parece que debo informarle —continuó la señorita Chancellor después de una breve pausa— de que ha sido una de las primeras, una de las más apasionadas abolicionistas.

En efecto, pensó que era su deber decírselo, y eso le produjo un ligero temblor de excitación. Sin embargo, si ella temía que Ransom pudiera mostrar alguna irritación ante la noticia, quedó desilusionada ante el buen humor con que este exclamó:

—Caramba, pobre señora… debe de ser ya muy anciana.

Por consiguiente la señorita Chancellor añadió con severidad:

—Ella nunca será vieja. Es el espíritu más joven que haya yo conocido. Pero si no tiene simpatía, tal vez será mejor que no venga —concluyó.

—¿Simpatía hacia qué, querida señorita? —preguntó Basil Ransom, sin lograr adoptar, a juicio de ella, el tono de una persona seria—. Si, como usted dice, va a

haber una discusión, tiene que haber distintas posiciones, y por supuesto uno no puede simpatizar con ambas.

—Sí, pero todos allí, a su manera, son partidarios de las nuevas verdades. Si a usted estas no le interesan no debe venir con nosotros.

—Insisto en que no tengo la menor idea de cuáles puedan ser. En el mundo hasta hoy no he tropezado sino con viejas verdades… tan viejas como el sol y la luna. ¿Cómo puedo conocerlas? Pero lléveme; será para mí una oportunidad de conocer Boston.

—¡No se trata de Boston, sino de la humanidad! —Al hacer esta observación la señorita Chancellor se levantó de su silla, y por sus ademanes parecía indicar que consentía en que la acompañara. Pero antes de dejar a solas a su acompañante para ir a arreglarse le hizo la observación de que estaba segura que él había comprendido muy bien de qué se trataba, solo que fingía no hacerlo.

—Bueno, después de todo, tal vez tenga una ligera idea —confesó Ransom—, pero no se da cuenta de cómo esta pequeña reunión me dará la oportunidad de robustecerla.

Ella dudó un poco; volvió a aparecer en su rostro una expresión de ansiedad.

—La señora Farrinder le aclarará sus ideas —dijo, y salió a prepararse.

El estado de ansiedad formaba parte de la naturaleza de esta pobre dama, el sumar escrúpulo sobre escrúpulo y prever las consecuencias de las cosas. Regresó diez minutos más tarde, con un sombrerito, que aparentemente usaba en reconocimiento al ascetismo de la señorita Birdseye. Mientras se calzaba los guantes —su huésped se había fortificado contra la señora Farrinder con otro vaso de vino—, la señorita Chancellor volvió a declarar que casi se arrepentía de haberle propuesto acompañarla; algo le decía que sería un elemento poco propicio.

—¿Cómo? ¿Se trata de una reunión espiritista? —preguntó Basil Ransom.

—Bien, yo he oído a la señorita Birdseye hablar bajo el influjo de la inspiración. —Olive Chancellor estaba determinada a mirarlo fijamente a los ojos mientras decía esto; la sensación de que sus palabras lograrían golpearlo actuaba en ella como estímulo y no como freno.

—¡Excelente, señorita Olive, todo esto parece hecho a propósito para mí! —exclamó el joven de Mississippi, radiante y frotándose las manos. Ella advirtió en ese momento que era muy apuesto, pero también reflexionó que, por desdicha, los hombres se

interesaban en la verdad, especialmente en las nuevas verdades, en razón inversa a su apostura. Ella tenía de todos modos un recurso del que poder echar mano en cualquier circunstancia: le había servido de ayuda en momentos de excitación extrema y era el de odiar a los hombres, por lo menos en cuanto categoría—. Tengo muchísimas ganas de ver a una vieja abolicionista; jamás he puesto los ojos en ninguna —añadió Basil Ransom.

—Por supuesto que no podía usted ver a ninguna en el Sur; las temían ustedes demasiado como para dejarlas llegar allá. —Ahora la señorita Chancellor trataba de buscar algo que decir que fuera en extremo desagradable, alguna frase que lo hiciera desistir de sus intentos de acompañarla. Era algo extraño registrar en una persona, sobre todo si estaba dotada de una sensibilidad tan aguda, el hecho de que sus pensamientos referentes a la invitación se transformaban de momento a momento en un miedo irracional ante el efecto que pudiera causar su presencia—. Tal vez a la señorita Birdseye le disguste que usted vaya —continuó mientras esperaban el carruaje.

—No lo sé; me parece que así va a ser —dijo Basil Ransom de buen humor. Evidentemente no tenía ninguna intención de dejar escapar esa oportunidad.

Por la ventana del comedor oyeron en aquel momento la llegada del vehículo. La señorita Birdseye vivía en el South End; la distancia era considerable y la señorita Chancellor había pedido un coche de punto; una de las ventajas de vivir en Charles Street era la de tener cerca los establos. La lógica de su conducta resultaba todo menos clara. De haber ido sola hubiese asistido a la reunión en tranvía; no por razones económicas (tenía la fortuna de no tener que depender del dinero hasta ese grado), tampoco por afición a pasear por Boston en la noche (un tipo de exhibición que la disgustaba profundamente) sino debido a una teoría que devotamente alimentaba, una teoría que la llevaba a eliminar las diferencias que creaba la envidia y a mezclarse en la vida ordinaria. Hubiera ido a pie a Boylston Street y allí hubiera tomado el vehículo público (en el fondo del alma lo detestaba) para ir hasta el South End. Boston estaba lleno de muchachas pobres que tenían que caminar por la noche y subirse a aquellos tranvías de caballos donde todos los sentidos resultaban mortificados; ¿por qué tenía que sentirse superior a ellas? Olive Chancellor regulaba su conducta por principios nobles, y esta era la razón por la que aquella noche, contando con la protección de un

caballero, pidió un carruaje para neutralizar esa protección. Si hubiesen ido juntos en el vehículo público habría sentido que le debía algo y él pertenecía a un sexo hacia el cual no deseaba tener ninguna deuda de gratitud. Meses antes, cuando le había escrito, lo había hecho con el sentimiento de ponerlo a él más bien en deuda. Mientras se dirigían hacia el South End, lado a lado, en medio de una buena dosis de silencio, tropezando y saltando sobre las ruedas del carruaje, aunque menos que si esas ruedas corrieran sobre ellos, y mirando cada uno a su lado las hileras de casas rojas, oscuras a la luz de las farolas, con frentes salientes, hacia las que se subía por escaleras de piedra; mientras proseguían, en esa ondulación contemplativa, la señorita Chancellor le dijo a su compañero, con un deseo concentrado de desafiarlo, como un castigo por haberla sumergido (no sabía explicarse por qué) en aquella turbación:

—¿No cree usted posible, entonces, el advenimiento de un nuevo día? ¿No cree posible que se pueda hacer nada por el género humano?

El pobre Ransom percibió el desafío, y se sintió apenado; se preguntó qué tipo era, después de todo, aquel que se había echado sobre los hombros, y qué juego estaba jugando o tratando de jugar con él. ¿Por qué Olive se le había insinuado si deseaba punzarlo de esta manera? Sin embargo, él estaba dispuesto a jugar cualquier clase de juego, ese igual que cualquier otro, y advirtió que estaba ya «dentro» de algo de lo que desde hacía tiempo deseaba tener una visión cercana.

—Bueno, señorita Olive —respondió, volviéndose a poner su gran sombrero, que hasta ese momento había tenido sobre las piernas—, lo que más me asombra es que el género humano haya nacido para soportar tales penas.

—Eso es lo que les dicen los hombres siempre a las mujeres, para hacerles soportar con paciencia la situación en que las han colocado.

—¡Oh, la condición de las mujeres! —exclamó Basil Ransom—. La condición de las mujeres es la de enloquecer a los hombres. Yo cambiaría mi posición por la de ustedes en cualquier momento —continuó—. Esto es lo que me decía cuando estaba sentado en su elegante apartamento.

No podía ver, debido a la oscuridad del carruaje, que ella se había ruborizado intensamente, y no supo que a ella le disgustaba que se le recordaran determinadas cosas que, según ella, trataban de mitigar la dureza de la vida de la mujer. Pero el

temblor apasionado con que, un momento después, le respondió su prima fue suficiente para confirmarle que él había tocado un punto sensible.

—¿Me reprocha usted que posea yo un poco de dinero? Mi más ardiente deseo es poder hacer algo con él por los demás… por los desafortunados.

Basil Ransom debió haber saludado esta última declaración con la simpatía que se merecía, habría podido felicitar a su pariente por sus nobles aspiraciones. Pero lo que más le impresionó fue la extrañeza de aquel tono áspero y tenso en una conversación que una hora o dos antes había transcurrido en perfecta amistad, y una vez más estalló en una risa incontenible. Esto hizo sentir a su compañera, intensamente, lo lejos que ella estaba de bromear.

—No sé por qué debía importarme lo que piense usted —dijo al final.

—No se preocupe… no se preocupe. ¿Qué importa eso? No tiene la más mínima importancia.

Ransom podría haber dicho eso, pero no era cierto; ella sentía que había razones por las cuales sí le importaba aquella conversación. Lo había acercado a su vida, y ahora ella debía pagar por ello. Pero quería conocer de una vez lo peor.

—¿Está usted en contra de nuestra emancipación? —le preguntó, volviendo hacia él una cara blanca por la momentánea irrupción de la luz de una farola.

—¿Quiere decir sus votos y discursos y todo ese tipo de cosas? —Al hacer esta pregunta Ransom intuyó toda la gravedad con que ella esperaba su respuesta; casi se espantó y no quiso atizar el fuego—. Se lo diré después de que haya escuchado a la señora Farrinder.

Habían llegado a la dirección indicada por la señorita Chancellor al cochero, y su vehículo se detuvo con una ligera sacudida. Basil Ransom descendió; permaneció al lado de la puerta con la mano extendida para ayudar a la joven. Pero ella pareció dudar; seguía sentada con su cara espectral. Al fin exclamó en voz baja:

—Usted odia nuestros esfuerzos.

—La señorita Birdseye me convertirá —dijo Ransom, con marcada intención, porque ahora sentía una gran curiosidad, y tenía miedo de que al final la señorita Chancellor se empeñara en impedirle entrar en la casa. Ella descendió sin su ayuda, y comenzó a subir los altos escalones de la residencia de la señorita Birdseye. Ransom

sentía una gran curiosidad, y entre las cosas que deseaba conocer era por qué le había escrito aquella susceptible solterona.

IV

La señorita Chancellor le había dicho, antes de salir, que debían llegar temprano; deseaba tener una conversación con la señorita Birdseye a solas antes de que llegara cualquier otro invitado. Eso era solo por el placer de verla, una verdadera oportunidad, ya que siempre estaba ocupada con otras personas. La señorita Birdseye recibió a Olive en el vestíbulo de la mansión, que tenía una fachada saliente, un número muy alto y muy grande —756— pintado con cifras doradas en el fanal de vidrio sobre la puerta, una placa metálica con el nombre de una doctora (Mary J. Prance) colocada en una de las ventanas de la planta baja, y una extraña apariencia de algo nuevo y a la vez consumido por los años, una especie de fatiga moderna, como ciertos artículos de escaparate que se venden a precios rebajados por estar algo gastados. La habitación era muy estrecha; una parte muy considerable estaba ocupada por una gran percha, de la que colgaban ya varios abrigos y chales; el resto dejaba espacio para permitir ver algunos movimientos de la señorita Birdseye, que se hizo a un lado para recibir a sus visitantes y que finalmente pasó frente a ellos para tratar de abrir una puerta, que resultó estar cerrada desde dentro. La señorita Birdseye era una mujer anciana, de pequeña estatura, con una cabeza enorme; eso fue lo primero que Ransom observó: la frente clara, espaciosa, protuberante, cándida, despejada, encima de un par de ojos fatigados, débiles y bondadosos; una frente que en vano un sombrerito colocado de modo que parecía que iba a caérsele hacia atrás a cada momento trataba de contrabalancear, y mientras hablaba, la señorita Birdseye de pronto alargaba la mano hasta el sombrerito con movimientos inútiles e injustificados. Tenía el rostro triste, delicado, pálido; parecía (y ese era el efecto de la enorme cabeza) que hubiese sido macerado, aplanado y desdibujado por exposición a un lento disolvente. La larga

práctica de la filantropía no había logrado fortalecer sus rasgos; había borrado las expresiones, los significados. Las olas de simpatía y de entusiasmo habían trabajado sobre ellos de la misma manera en que las olas del tiempo terminan finalmente por modificar la superficie de los viejos bustos de mármol, eliminando poco a poco todas las asperezas, todos los detalles. En su amplio rostro aquella vaga sonrisita parecía perderse. Era un mero esbozo de sonrisa, una especie de abono de un pago a plazos; parecía querer indicar que sonreiría más ampliamente si tuviera tiempo disponible, pero ya aquel gesto dejaba entrever su generosidad y su capacidad para dejarse seducir fácilmente por sentimientos de amistad.

Vestía siempre de la misma manera; llevaba una especie de amplio chaquetón negro, con bolsillos profundos, llenos siempre de papeles, residuos de una correspondencia voluminosa; por debajo de aquella chaqueta salía un corto vestido de lana. La brevedad de esta prenda, muy simple, era el expediente mediante el cual la señorita Birdseye trataba de sugerir que era una mujer de negocios, que deseaba libertad de acción. Pertenecía, por supuesto, a la Liga de las Faldas Cortas; pues formaba parte, sin excepción, de todas y cada una de las ligas que hasta la fecha se hubieran fundado cualquiera que fuese el propósito. Esto no le impedía ser una anciana confusa, complicada, inconsecuente, discursiva, cuya caridad comenzaba en casa y no se sabía dónde acababa, cuya ingenuidad no se quedaba atrás, y que sabía menos de sus semejantes, si eso era posible, después de cincuenta años de celo humanitario, que el día que había decidido lanzarse al campo de batalla a luchar contra las injusticias de la vida. Basil Ransom conocía muy poco sobre ese tipo de existencias, pero la señorita Birdseye le pareció la revelación de una clase, y una multitud de personajes socialistas, de nombres y episodios de los que había oído hablar, se agrupaban tras ella. Su aspecto era el de la persona que ha pasado la vida en tribunas, auditorios, convenciones, falansterios y *séances*; en su cara fatigada se veía casi el reflejo de las malas lámparas usadas durante esas sesiones; por la tendencia que tenía de mirar siempre hacia arriba, parecía dirigirse hacia un orador público, con un esfuerzo de respiración que siempre provoca el aire viciado en que, por lo general, se discuten las reformas sociales. Hablaba constantemente, con una voz quebradiza como la de un timbre eléctrico demasiado gastado; y cuando la señorita Chancellor le explicó que había llevado al

señor Ransom porque aquel tenía grandes deseos de conocer a la señora Farrinder, ella le tendió al joven una pequeña mano frágil, sucia, democrática, mirándolo con simpatía, ya que le era imposible hacerlo de otra manera, pero sin la menor discriminación referente a quienes no habían tenido la fortuna (la que tal vez implicara una injusticia) de estar presentes en una ocasión tan interesante. Le dio la impresión de vivir muy pobremente, pero hasta más tarde no se enteró de que la señorita Birdseye jamás había tenido un centavo en su vida. Nadie sabía exactamente de qué vivía; cuando tenía algún dinero lo daba inmediatamente a un negro o a un refugiado. Ninguna mujer hubiera podido ser más imparcial, aunque, en general, ella prefería esas dos categorías del género humano. Desde el fin de la guerra civil muchas de sus ocupaciones habían cesado; ya que antes la mayor parte de su vida había transcurrido imaginándose que ayudaba a algún esclavo del Sur a escapar. No era por tanto desatinado el preguntarse si en lo más profundo de su corazón no desearía a veces, solo por volver a experimentar aquel género de excitación, que los negros volvieran a encontrarse encadenados. Del mismo modo había sufrido por el relajamiento de algunos despotismos europeos, ya que en años anteriores, buena parte de lo que daba el tono romántico a su vida había consistido en suavizar las almohadas del exilio a conspiradores desterrados. Sus refugiados habían sido para ella algo precioso; siempre estaba tratando de recaudar dinero para un polaco cadavérico, de conseguir clases para que las impartiera un italiano descamisado. Corría la leyenda de que un húngaro había poseído en una época su corazón, y que luego había desaparecido robándole todo cuanto poseía. Era, sin embargo, una leyenda apócrifa, ya que ella jamás había poseído nada, y además se prestaba a serias dudas el que hubiese podido concebir un sentimiento tan personal. Ya en esa época ella podía enamorarse solo de causas, y languidecer ante cualquier forma de emancipación. Pero habían sido sus días más felices, porque cuando aquellas causas se encarnaban en extranjeros (¿qué otra cosa si no eran los africanos?) eran sin lugar a dudas más sugestivas.

Había bajado en ese momento para ver a la doctora Prance, para ver si deseaba subir. Pero no la encontró en su habitación, y la señorita Birdseye supuso que había salido a cenar. Cenaba siempre en una pensión a dos calles de distancia. La señorita Birdseye expresó su esperanza de que la señorita Chancellor hubiese ya cenado, ella lo

había hecho con holgura de tiempo pues ese día no había llegado todavía nadie; no sabía qué podía haberlos retrasado tanto. Ransom advirtió que las chaquetas que colgaban de la percha no eran señal de que los amigos de la señorita Birdseye estuviesen ya reunidos; si se hubiera detenido a observarlas un poco más, habría identificado la casa como uno de esos locales en que se encuentran siempre misteriosas prendas de vestir colgadas en algún gancho en el vestíbulo. Los visitantes de la señorita Birdseye, los de la doctora Prance y los de otros inquilinos —pues la residencia marcada con el número 756 era la vivienda de muchas personas entre quienes reinaba una gran confusión de confines— acostumbraban a dejar allí objetos que luego volvían a reclamar; muchos se presentaban con bolsos de mano para los que siempre estaban buscando un sitio en que depositarlos. Lo que completaba la atmósfera de aquel edificio era el apartamento de la propia señorita Birdseye, al cual, precisamente en aquel instante, entraban, y donde fueron seguidos por varios otros miembros del círculo de aquella buena dama. A decir verdad, el apartamento era un complemento de sí misma, si algo podía decirse para rendir un tributo a aquella anciana tan esencialmente informal, que no tenía más estilo del que puede tener una paca de heno. Pero la desnudez de su salón, amplio, vacío, abierto a todos los vientos (tenía exactamente la misma forma que el de la señorita Chancellor), manifestaba que nunca había tenido otras necesidades que no fueran las de carácter moral, y que toda su historia había sido la de sus simpatías. El lugar estaba iluminado por una pequeña lámpara de gas, que lo hacía aparecer blanquecino e informe. Hasta el mismo Basil Ransom se quedó impresionado por aquella escualidez y se dijo que su prima debía de tener algo metido entre ceja y ceja para gustar de semejante sitio. Lo que entonces no sabía, y tampoco llegó a saber jamás, era que ella lo odiaba mortalmente, y que en una carrera en la que constantemente se exponía a ofensas y mortificaciones de todo género, sus más agudos sufrimientos provenían de las ofensas a su sentido del gusto. Había tratado de aniquilar aquella fibra, de persuadirse de que el gusto era solo una frivolidad con disfraz de sabiduría; pero su sensibilidad volvía a surgir constantemente y hacía que se preguntase si la carencia de cosas atractivas era una parte integrante del entusiasmo humanitario. La señorita Birdseye trataba siempre de obtener empleos, lecciones de dibujo, encargos de retratos, para artistas pobres extranjeros, cuyo talento garantizaba sin la

menor reserva; aunque, en realidad, no tuviera la más mínima capacidad de percepción del elemento escénico o plástico de la vida.

Hacia las nueve de la noche la luz de la triste lámpara de gas se reflejó sobre la majestuosa personalidad de la señora Farrinder, que hubiera contribuido a responder en sentido negativo a los escrúpulos de la señorita Chancellor. Era una mujer robusta y atractiva, en la que ciertas angulosidades habían sido corregidas por un aire triunfal; llevaba un vestido susurrante (era la muestra de su punto de vista sobre el buen gusto), una abundante cabellera de un negro brillante, los brazos extendidos, que parecían tratar de expresar que el reposo, en una carrera como la suya, era algo tan dulce como breve, y una terrible regularidad de expresión. Aplico ese adjetivo a su máscara de placidez porque parecía dirigir a sus interlocutores una pregunta cuya respuesta ya conocía de antemano; la pregunta que suscitaba era cómo un rostro así podía no ser hermoso con tal regularidad de rasgos. Era imposible poner en duda ni la perfección ni la nobleza de aquel rostro y había que rendirse al hecho de que la señora Farrinder lograba imponerse. Había una cierta tersura litográfica en torno a ella, y una mezcla de la matrona americana y el personaje público. Había algo de ese personaje público que se revelaba en sus ojos, grandes, fríos y serenos; habían adquirido un aire de reticencia formal debido al hecho de tener que mirar siempre desde lo alto de una tribuna de conferencias, por encima de las cabezas de la multitud mientras su distinguida propietaria era elogiosamente presentada por un ciudadano ilustre. La señora Farrinder, en casi todas las ocasiones, mantenía el aire de quien es presentado con algún comentario pertinente. Hablaba con lentitud y claridad, y evidentemente con un alto sentido de responsabilidad; pronunciaba cada sílaba de todas las palabras e insistía en ser explícita. Si, en conversación con ella, usted intentaba considerar algo como ya establecido, o saltar dos o tres escalones de golpe, ella hacía una pausa, lo miraba con fría paciencia, como si ya conociera ese truco, y entonces continuaba su exposición con su habitual paso mesurado. Sus conferencias tenían por tema la templanza y los derechos de la mujer; los fines que proseguía eran el de darles a las mujeres de su país el derecho a votar y el de apartar de la mano de los hombres la copa burbujeante. Gozaba de gran consideración por sus modales refinados, y porque encarnaba las virtudes domésticas y las gracias de la vida de salón; era, en efecto, una prueba

contundente de que para las damas la tribuna no es de ninguna manera incompatible con el hogar. Tenía un marido llamado Amariah.

La doctora Prance había vuelto de la cena e hizo su aparición en respuesta a una invitación que la voz desmayada de la señorita Birdseye le dirigía desde el corredor, apoyada en la balaustrada de la escalera, con insistencia para obtener su atención. Era una joven de aspecto sobrio y modesto, de cabello corto y gafas. Miraba a su alrededor con el aire de desaprobación de los miopes, y parecía esperar que no se le pidiera hacer ninguna declaración, ni que se pensara que hubiese subido con algún otro propósito más social que ver qué se le ofrecía en esa ocasión a la señorita Birdseye. A eso de las nueve de la noche se hallaban reunidas unas veinte personas, acomodadas en las sillas colocadas a lo largo de las paredes de la sala estrecha y sin adornos; lo que producía el efecto de un enorme tranvía. El apartamento contenía pocas cosas más fuera de esas sillas, muchas de las cuales tenían el aspecto de haber sido prestadas, lo que implicaba alcobas desnudas en las regiones superiores; una mesa o dos con cubiertas de mármol descolorido, unos cuantos libros, y una colección de periódicos apilados en un rincón. Ransom podía ver por su cuenta que la ocasión no era precisamente festiva: faltaba en efecto un movimiento de cordialidad entre los invitados y, entre la mayor parte de los asistentes, hasta de reconocimiento mutuo. Estaban sentados allí, como si esperasen algo, y miraban con el rabillo del ojo y en silencio a la señora Farrinder, dando la clara impresión de que, por fortuna, no se encontraban reunidos allí para divertirse. Las damas, que constituían una abrumadora mayoría, llevaban sombreritos semejantes al de la señorita Chancellor; los hombres tenían un aire fatigado, muchos de ellos llevaban abrigos raídos. Dos o tres seguían con los zapatos cubiertos por chanclos de goma y al acercarse era muy perceptible el olor a goma de mala calidad. Por supuesto la señorita Birdseye jamás había percibido ese tipo de cosas; ella nunca sabía a qué olían ni qué sabor tenían los alimentos que comía. La mayor parte de sus amigos tenían una mirada ansiosa y fatigada, aunque había algunas escasas excepciones, media docena de rostros plácidos y floridos. Basil Ransom se preguntaba quiénes serían todas aquellas personas. Tenía una idea general de que se trataba de médiums, comunistas y vegetarianos. No era que la señorita Birdseye no se hubiese dedicado a circular entre ellos reiterando sus preguntas y dejando amistosamente de escuchar las

respuestas; se sentó por turno junto a cada uno de ellos, diciendo vaga y bondadosamente «Sí, sí» a los comentarios que le hacían, llevándose de vez en cuando una mano al bolsillo lleno de papeles de su amplia chaqueta, reacomodándose el sombrero y colocándose las gafas, pero tratando más que nada de enterarse para qué había reunido a toda aquella gente. Al fin le pareció recordar que se trataba de algo más o menos relacionado con la señora Farrinder; que esa elocuente dama había prometido favorecer a la compañía con el relato de algunos incidentes de su última campaña; trazar tal vez las líneas de un plan de acción para el próximo invierno. Eso era lo que Olive Chancellor había ido a escuchar; esa sería la atracción para el joven de ojos negros (parecido a un genio) que la había acompañado al lugar. La señorita Birdseye se abrió nuevamente paso para ir a reunirse con la gran conferenciante, que en ese momento dispensaba una indulgente atención a la señorita Chancellor; esta última estaba comprimida en un espacio mínimo para poder estar sentada cerca de ella; tenía las manos juntas y una expresión tan concentrada e inquisitiva que por contraste los modales de la señora Farrinder parecían libres y desenvueltos. En aquel tránsito, la anfitriona fue detenida por la llegada de nuevos peregrinos. No recordaba de ninguna manera haber mencionado a tanta gente la celebración de esa reunión; solo recordaba, por así decir, a aquellos a quienes se había olvidado de invitar, y eso era, sin duda alguna, una prueba del interés que sentía por la obra de la señora Farrinder. Los recién llegados eran el doctor Tarrant con su esposa y su hija Verena; él era un curandero mesmeriano y ella pertenecía a una antigua familia abolicionista. La señorita Birdseye esbozó una vaga y seca sonrisa dirigida a la hija, un rostro nuevo para ella, y de alguna manera creyó percibir que se trataba de una joven de inteligencia notable; tenía por qué serlo. En cada huésped la señorita Birdseye descubría un genio. Selah Tarrant había efectuado curaciones prodigiosas; ella conocía a muchas personas que si solo se decidieran a ponerse en sus manos… Su mujer era hija de Abraham Greenstreet; ella había ocultado a un esclavo fugitivo en su casa durante treinta días. Eso había ocurrido muchos años atrás, cuando esta joven debía de haber sido una niña; pero ¿no habría creado ese hecho una especie de arco iris sobre su cuna, y no debía de tener por ello una especie de don natural? La muchacha era muy bonita a pesar de ser pelirroja.

V

Mientras tanto la señora Farrinder no mostraba demasiados deseos de dirigirse a la asamblea. Se lo confesaba en ese momento a Olive Chancellor, con una sonrisa, y le pedía que no considerara con demasiada dureza su momentánea falta de energía. Se había dirigido a tantas asambleas que ahora lo que quería era escuchar a otras personas. La señorita Chancellor, por ejemplo, seguramente había pensado mucho sobre aquel argumento de vital importancia; ¿no querría hacer unas cuantas observaciones y ofrecerles algo de su experiencia? ¿Qué opinaban sobre el voto las damas de Beacon Street? Tal vez la señorita Chancellor podría hablar por ellas mejor que por otras personas. Esa era una rama del asunto sobre la cual las líderes no estaban demasiado informadas; pero era necesario saberlo todo; ¿por qué no consideraba la señorita Chancellor trabajar en aquel terreno? La señorita Farrinder hablaba con el tono de quien tiene miras tan amplias que era fácil al principio, antes de que uno pudiera advertir la envergadura de su visión, considerarlas casi falaces; ella era consciente de que el fin que se proponía alcanzar trascendía siempre el primer vuelo de una imaginación normal. Le insistía a su compañera sobre la idea de trabajar en el mundo elegante, parecía querer atribuirle relaciones familiares con ese reino misterioso, y quería saber por qué no trataba de despertar en algunas de sus amigas un movimiento de simpatía hacia la causa de la mujer.

Olive Chancellor recogió esta solicitud con sentimientos muy mezclados. Dada su inmensa simpatía hacia las reformas, esperaba que los reformadores fueran un poco diferentes. Había un elemento de grandeza en la señora Farrinder; lo obligaba a uno a estar de su lado: pero había una nota de falsedad cuando hablaba con su joven amiga sobre las damas de Beacon Street. Olive detestaba que se hablara de aquella avenida

como si fuera un lugar notable, y que vivir allí fuera una prueba de gloria mundana. Allí vivía toda clase de gente mediocre, y una mujer tan brillante como la señora Farrinder, que vivía en Roxbury, no debía cometer tales errores. Comprendía que era absurdo que la irritaran esos errores; pero no era esta la primera vez que la señorita Chancellor había observado que la posesión de nervios no era en sí una razón válida para abrazar las nuevas verdades. Conocía su puesto en la jerarquía bostoniana, y no era el que la señora Farrinder suponía; así que era una falta de perspectiva hablarle como si fuera una representante de la aristocracia. Nada sería menos válido, lo sabía muy bien, que aplicar (en Estados Unidos) ese término demasiado literalmente; por otra parte lo que sí representaría una realidad sería decir, para distinguir las situaciones, que los Chancellor pertenecían a la *bourgeoisie*... la más antigua y la mejor. Ellos podían valorar en poco o en mucho esta posición (en realidad se sentían muy orgullosos de ella), y eso, precisamente, hacía que la señora Farrinder le pareciera provinciana (había algo provinciano, después de todo, en el modo en que se peinaba) por no entenderlo. Cuando la señorita Birdseye hablaba de alguien como un «representante de la alta sociedad», Olive podía perdonar esa odiosa expresión, porque, por supuesto, no iba nadie a pretender que ella, pobrecita, tuviera la menor noción de la realidad. Ella era heroica, era sublime, toda la historia moral de Boston se reflejaba en sus lentes mal colocados; pero era un elemento de su originalidad el que fuera tan deliciosamente provinciana. Olive Chancellor consideraba poseer los suficientes privilegios, aun sin estar afiliada a ese grupo exclusivo ni recibir invitaciones para las reuniones íntimas, que constituían la verdadera prueba; era una gracia para ella no tener que añadir esa inmoralidad a su conciencia. Las damas a las que la señora Farrinder se refería (era de suponer que tenía en mente a algunas en particular) podían hablar por sí mismas. La señorita Chancellor quería trabajar en otro campo; desde hacía mucho tiempo estaba interesada por los sentimientos populares. Tenía deseos inmensos de conocer íntimamente a alguna joven muy pobre. Aquel parecía un tipo de placer fácilmente obtenible; y, sin embargo, no le había resultado así. Había dos o tres pálidas dependientas de comercio cuyo trato había intentado; pero parecía que tuvieran algún temor de ella, y aquellos intentos se habían desvanecido en la nada. Ella consideraba la situación de las jóvenes de una manera más trágica de lo que lo hacían estas; no

lograban comprender qué deseaba de ellas, y siempre terminaban por estar odiosamente enredadas con algún Charlie. Charlie era siempre un joven de chaqueta blanca y cuello de cartón; en última instancia era por él por quien ellas se preocupaban sobre todo. Más les interesaba Charlie que el derecho a votar. Olive Chancellor se preguntaba de qué manera la señora Farrinder consideraba ese aspecto de la cuestión. En el trato con sus jóvenes conciudadanas había siempre encontrado a ese zagal impertinente plantado en el camino, y llegó al fin a detestarlo extremadamente. La llenaba de exasperación que el tal Charlie pudiera ser necesario para la felicidad de sus víctimas (había terminado por descubrir que aunque con ella entablaran conversaciones de otro tipo, era de él, de él, solo de él, de quien hablaban entre ellas), y una de las principales recomendaciones del club vespertino que desde hacía tiempo tenía pensado fundar para el recreo de sus hermanas fatigadas y mal pagadas era la de minar de algún modo su prestigio… aunque sería fácil prever que él estaría esperando cerca de la puerta. Apenas supo qué contestarle a la señora Farrinder, cuando esta momentáneamente desorientada mujer, preocupada todavía con las elegantes damas del Milldam, volvió a la carga.

—Tenemos necesidad de personas que trabajen en ese campo, aunque yo conozco a dos o tres damas encantadoras (dulces amas de casa) que se mueven en círculos en su mayoría cerrados a toda nueva voz, que están haciendo todo lo que está de su parte para auxiliarnos en nuestra lucha. Tengo anotados varios nombres que la dejarían sorprendida, nombres muy conocidos en State Street. Pero nunca tendremos demasiadas reclutas, especialmente entre los medios de gran refinamiento. Si fuera necesario, estaríamos dispuestas a hacer algunas concesiones para conciliar a los tibios. Nuestro movimiento es de todas, necesita también hasta de las damas más delicadas. Levante la bandera entre ellas, y tráigame mil nombres. Conozco algunos que me gustaría tener. Yo me intereso por igual en los detalles más minuciosos que en las grandes líneas —añadió la señora Farrinder en un tono de explicación que se podía esperar de una mujer de su talla, y con una sonrisa cuya dulzura le produjo un escalofrío a su interlocutora.

—¡Pero yo no puedo hablar con esas personas, no puedo! —dijo Olive Chancellor, con una cara que parecía implorar para que se le eximiera de esa responsabilidad—. Yo quiero entregarme a otros; conocer todo aquello que yace por debajo y fuera de

nuestra vista. Quiero entrar en la vida de mujeres que están solas, que llevan existencias lastimosas. Quiero estar cerca de ellas… ayudarlas. Quiero hacer algo… oh, ¡cuánto me gustaría saber hablarles!

—Nos encantaría que nos hiciera usted hoy algunas sugerencias—declaró la señora Farrinder con una determinación que revelaba sus facultades de mando.

—Oh, no, por favor, yo no sé hablar; no tengo absolutamente ningún talento para hacerlo; no tengo dominio de mí misma, carezco de elocuencia; no puedo hilar tres palabras juntas. Pero me gustaría contribuir.

—¿Qué puede usted proporcionar? —preguntó la señora Farrinder, mirando a su interlocutora de arriba abajo, con un ojo de empresaria no carente de cierta frialdad—. ¿Tiene usted dinero?

Olive estaba tan agitada en ese momento con la esperanza de que esa gran mujer la aprobara desde el punto de vista financiero que no tuvo tiempo para pensar que, por cortesía, debía haberse mencionado alguna otra cualidad. Admitió contar con cierto capital, y el tono en que la señora Farrinder le respondió le pareció rico y profundo:

—Contribuya entonces con eso.

Fue lo suficientemente generosa como para desarrollar delante de ella una idea y pintarle el cuadro de la parte que la señorita Chancellor desempeñaría al hacer una donación a un fondo para la difusión entre las mujeres americanas de una concepción más adecuada de sus derechos públicos y privados… un fondo que ella había recientemente inaugurado. Esa exposición rápida y vibrante tenía la viveza que caracterizaba los esfuerzos públicos de mayor éxito de la oradora. Olive permanecía subyugada; se sintió casi inspirada. Si su vida podía impresionar a otros de esa manera, aun a mujeres como la señora Farrinder, cuyo horizonte era tan amplio, entonces ella tenía un lugar en el mundo. Era una elección que debía tomar por su cuenta, pero en aquel momento la gran representante de la emancipación de su sexo (de la emancipación con respecto a cualquier forma de servidumbre) la había tomado por ella.

Aquel cuarto desnudo, iluminado por la débil luz del gas, se hizo más y más rico ante sus ojos severos; le pareció dilatarse, abrirse ante la gran vida de la humanidad. Aquellas personas serias con sus sombreritos y sus gabanes comenzaron a resplandecer

como un ejército de héroes. Sí, ella podía hacer algo, se dijo a sí misma Olive Chancellor; podía hacer algo para iluminar la oscuridad de esa imagen tenebrosa que tenía siempre ante sí, y contra la cual le parecía a veces estar destinada a encabezar una cruzada: la imagen de la infelicidad femenina. ¡La infelicidad femenina! Tenía siempre en los oídos la voz de sus sufrimientos silenciosos. El océano de lágrimas derramadas por las mujeres desde el comienzo de los tiempos le parecía derramarse ante sus propios ojos. Siglos de opresión quedaban detrás de ellas. Millones y millones de mujeres habían vivido solo para ser torturadas y crucificadas. Eran sus hermanas, eran de las suyas, y el día de su redención comenzaba a alborear. Esa era la única causa sagrada; esa era la gran revolución, la justa. Tendría que triunfar; debía barrer con todo lo que se interpusiera en su camino; debía exigir de la otra raza, brutal, manchada de sangre, egoísta, una expiación total. Iba a ser el cambio más impresionante que el mundo conocería; iba a comenzar una nueva era para la familia humana, y los nombres de quienes habían contribuido a dirigir los escuadrones brillarían en los anales de la historia. Serían los nombres de mujeres débiles, insultadas, perseguidas, pero devotas con cada fibra de su ser a la causa, y que no pedirían otro privilegio sino que se les permitiera morir por ella. Esta interesante joven no tenía del todo claro en qué modo un sacrificio (como el último enumerado por su imaginación) podría ser llevado a efecto; ella veía el asunto a través de una nube abstracta de emociones crepusculares en la que el peligro era tan prometedor como el éxito. Cuando la señorita Birdseye se le acercó, esta vaga atmósfera aureoló su figura menuda y un tanto ridícula, y logró que aquel pobre saco de causas humanitarias pareciera casi una mártir. Olive Chancellor la miró con amor, recordando que nunca, en sus largos años de vida atribulada y sin recompensas, había tenido un solo pensamiento para sí misma. Había sido consumida por la llama de la piedad humana, que la había maltratado como a un viejo guante de piel. Se habían reído de ella, pero ella lo había ignorado; había sido considerada como una calamidad, sin que eso le importara en lo más mínimo. No tenía nada en el mundo fuera del vestido que llevaba puesto, y cuando descendiera a la tumba no dejaría nada tras sí más que su grotesco, vulgar y patético nombre. Y había gente que decía que las mujeres eran vanidosas, egoístas, interesadas. Mientras la señorita Birdseye, de pie, le preguntaba a la señora Farrinder si quería dirigirles algunas palabras, Olive Chancellor

le cerró con ternura un pequeño broche mellado que le rodeaba el cuello y que se había desenganchado.

VI

—Gracias, gracias —dijo la señorita Birdseye—, no me gustaría perderlo; ¡se trata de un regalo de Mirandola!

Aquel había sido uno de sus muchos protegidos exiliados de los viejos tiempos, en una época en que dos o tres de los amigos de la señorita Birdseye, conocedores de los escasos recursos de Mirandola, se preguntaban cómo había podido obtener aquella joya. Ella se había detenido de nuevo, después de saludar al doctor y a la señora Tarrant, para presentar al joven y moreno acompañante de la señorita Chancellor a la doctora Prance. Había advertido la presencia de aquella figura ligeramente sombría, apoyada en la pared, cerca de la puerta; permanecía allí completamente solitario, desaprovechando las oportunidades que, según la señorita Birdseye, tenían un gran valor para la colectividad, y en busca de las cuales, por supuesto, los forasteros emprendían el viaje a Boston. No se le ocurrió preguntarse por qué la señorita Chancellor no hablaba con él, ya que lo había llevado. La señorita Birdseye era incapaz de una reflexión de ese tipo. Olive, por supuesto, se había dado cuenta de que su pariente permanecía solo, aun en los momentos en que la señora Farrinder la transportó, con sus palabras, a un plano superior. Lo había estado observando desde el otro extremo de la habitación; vio que seguramente se estaría aburriendo, pero decidió no preocuparse demasiado. Después de todo le había pedido que no asistiera. Además no estaba en una situación peor que la de los demás; estaba esperando, como todo el resto; y antes de que se retiraran pensaba presentárselo a la señora Farrinder. Debería prevenirla primero, no todos podrían desear conocer a una persona que había tomado parte en la deslealtad sudista. En ese momento nuestra joven protagonista supo que al solicitar conocer a aquel primo distante había hecho en efecto algo mucho más

complicado de lo que suponía. No había logrado liberarse del todo del repentino sentimiento de irritación que la había acometido cuando viajaban en el carruaje, aunque ahora, en compañía de otras personas, lo percibiera menos, especialmente mientras permanecía al lado de la señora Farrinder, que era una verdadera fuente de energía. Por otra parte, si Ransom se aburría, podía perfectamente hablar con alguien. Cerca de él se encontraban algunas personas excelentes, aunque fuesen reformadoras ardientes. Podía hablar con aquella muchacha tan bonita que había llegado, la pelirroja, si le parecía bien; se suponía que los hombres del Sur eran siempre galantes.

Los razonamientos de la señorita Birdseye fueron mucho más elementales, y no se le ocurrió presentar al joven a Verena Tarrant, a quien al parecer sus padres estaban presentando a un grupo de amigos en el otro extremo de la sala. La señorita Birdseye recordó a ese respecto que Verena había estado ausente durante mucho tiempo, casi un año; había ido a visitar a unos amigos en el Oeste, y por consiguiente resultaba casi una extraña a la mayoría de los integrantes del círculo de Boston. La doctora Prance la estaba observando con sus pequeños ojos fijos y penetrantes, y la buena señora se preguntaba si aquella estaría molesta por haber asistido a su reunión. Tenía la impresión general de que las personas de genio tienen siempre un temperamento irascible, y ese podía ser el caso de la doctora Prance. Quiso decirle que podía retirarse si así lo deseaba; pero hasta la mente nada sofisticada de la señorita Birdseye comprendía que aquella era una fórmula poco adecuada para tratar a un invitado. Trató de sacar de su ensimismamiento al joven sureño; le dijo que consideraba que pronto tendrían una sesión muy interesante. La señora Farrinder era capaz de entretener perfectamente al público cuando se lo proponía. Y entonces la señorita Birdseye pensó que debía presentarlo a la doctora Prance: eso le serviría como pretexto para haberla hecho subir. Es más, le haría bien interrumpir un poco su trabajo de vez en cuando; la doctora continuaba sus estudios médicos durante la noche, y la señorita Birdseye, que dormía poco (Mary Prance quería tratarla precisamente contra el insomnio), la había oído varias veces a las primeras horas de la madrugada, por su ventana abierta (el aire fresco era una de sus obsesiones) afilando sus instrumentos (tenía la vaga creencia de que disecaba animales), en un pequeño laboratorio fisiológico que había instalado en el cuarto trasero, el cuarto que, de no haber sido doctora, hubiese sido su dormitorio, y

que tal vez lo era, a pesar de las vivisecciones, ¿cómo podía saberlo la señorita Birdseye? Presentó a sus dos jóvenes amigos, tal vez con un poco de incoherencia, y luego fue a tratar de animar a la señora Farrinder.

Basil Ransom había advertido ya la presencia de la doctora Prance; no se había aburrido del todo durante el tiempo que había permanecido solo, había observado a todas las personas que poblaban el salón, llegando a las conclusiones más disparatadas. La joven médica le había impresionado como un perfecto ejemplo de la «hembra yanqui», la figura que, en la imaginación no reformada de los hijos de los estados del algodón, era producto del sistema educativo de la Nueva Inglaterra, el código puritano, los climas severos, la ausencia de caballerosidad. Delgada, seca, dura, sin una curva, flexibilidad ni gracia, daba la impresión de no querer tomar ventajas en la lucha por la vida, pero tampoco de conceder ninguna. Sin embargo Ransom advirtió que no era una reformista entusiasta, y después de su contacto con el entusiasmo de su prima, eso fue casi un alivio para él. Era evidente que si hubiera sido un muchacho, Mary Prance habría abandonado la escuela para dedicarse a hacer experimentos personales de mecánica o investigaciones de historia natural. Es cierto también que si hubiera sido un muchacho mantendría relaciones con una muchacha, mientras que la doctora Prance parecía no sostener ningún tipo de relaciones. Fuera de sus inteligentes ojos los demás rasgos eran inmencionables. Ransom le preguntó si ya conocía a la leona, y como lo contemplara sin ofrecer ninguna respuesta, él le explicó que se refería a la célebre señora Farrinder.

—Bueno, no sé si puedo decir que la conozco; pero la he oído en la tribuna. He pagado mi medio dólar —añadió la doctora con cierta rudeza.

—¿Y bien? ¿La convenció? —le preguntó Ransom.

—¿De qué debía convencerme, señor?

—De que las mujeres son superiores a los hombres.

—¡Oh, santo cielo! —dijo la doctora Prance, con un suspiro de impaciencia—. Supongo que yo sé más sobre las mujeres que ella.

—Y no opina usted lo mismo que ella, espero —dijo Ransom con una sonrisa.

—Para mí los hombres y las mujeres son exactamente lo mismo —respondió la doctora Prance—. No veo absolutamente ninguna diferencia. Ambos sexos tienen

todavía mucho camino que recorrer para mejorar. Ninguno de ellos ha llegado a su justo nivel. —Y como Ransom quería saber cuál era a su juicio ese justo nivel, ella respondió—: Bueno, deberían vivir mejor, eso es lo que deberían hacer. —Y luego declaró que según ella todos hablaban demasiado.

Durante mucho tiempo esta había sido la convicción de Basil Ransom, así que su corazón se suavizó ante las palabras de la doctora Prance y le rindió homenaje a la manera de Mississippi: con tal riqueza de elogios que al fin ella lo miró con sus ojos penetrantes y suspicaces. Esto lo frenó; seguramente la joven estaba pensando que él hablaba demasiado, mientras que ella daba la impresión de no ser capaz de sostener una conversación. Ransom consideró pertinente, de cualquier manera, observar que creía que iban a escuchar una conferencia de la señora Farrinder… no sabía por qué no había comenzado todavía.

—Sí —asintió la doctora Prance, con bastante sequedad—, supongo que fue para eso para lo que me llamó la señorita Birdseye. Parecía pensar que yo no debía perderme esta lección.

—Por lo que veo, se consolaría usted fácilmente de perderse la perorata —insinuó Ransom.

—Bueno, me gustaría terminar un trabajo. ¡No quiero que nadie me enseñe qué es capaz de hacer una mujer! —declaró la doctora Prance—. La mujer puede hacer muchas cosas si lo intenta. Además, ya conozco las teorías de la señora Farrinder y sé todo lo que va a decir aquí.

—Entonces dígamelo, ya que ella se obstina en permanecer callada.

—Mire, la esencia de sus discursos es que la mujer desea conocer una época mejor. Eso es lo que se deduce al final. Y de eso soy consciente sin que tenga que decírmelo.

—¿Y no simpatiza usted con tal aspiración?

—Me parece que no cultivo mi lado sentimental —dijo la doctora Prance—. Ya hay abundante simpatía sin mí. Que deseen conocer una época mejor eso me parece de lo más natural; lo mismo desean los hombres, me imagino. Pero en lo que a mí respecta no siento la necesidad de hacer sacrificios por eso. No me parece que lo mejor que se pueda tener sea una época maravillosa.

Las opiniones de aquella pequeña dama eran precisas y técnicas. Era evidente que no le importaban demasiado los grandes movimientos; cada vez le resultaba más interesante a Basil Ransom, quien, según me temo, tenía un gran fondo de cinismo. Le preguntó si conocía a su prima, la señorita Chancellor, y se la mostró, al lado de la señora Farrinder; ella, en cambio, dijo Ransom, creía en tiempos maravillosos (pensaba que estaban ya en camino), sentía bastante simpatía por esa causa, y estaba seguro de que lo que más deseaba era sacrificarse por ella.

La doctora Prance la miró a través del salón durante un momento; luego dijo que no la conocía, pero que suponía que conocía a otras mujeres semejantes a ella… las atendía cuando estaban enfermas.

—Por lo visto está recibiendo una conferencia exclusivamente para ella —comentó Ransom.

A lo que la doctora repuso:

—Apostaría a que tendrá que pagarla.

Parecía lamentar todavía la pérdida de su medio dólar e irritarse vagamente ante la conducta de su sexo. Ransom lo comprendió al punto de considerar poco delicado insistir con otras preguntas sobre la causa feminista, y para cambiar de conversación se dedicó a solicitar de su compañera alguna información sobre los caballeros ahí presentes. Le había dado una oportunidad, vanamente, de iniciar por su cuenta alguna conversación; pero podía advertir claramente que fuera de las investigaciones de las que había sido arrancada esa noche no tenía ningún interés personal sobre el cual iniciar una conversación. Conocía a dos o tres de aquellos caballeros; los había visto en ocasiones anteriores en la casa de la señorita Birdseye. Por supuesto a quienes conocía mejor era a las damas; todavía no había llegado el tiempo en que un caballero enviara a buscar a una doctora, y esperaba que nunca llegara, aunque algunas personas parecían pensar que era por eso por lo que trabajaban las doctoras. Conocía al señor Pardon; era aquel joven de las patillas y el cabello blanco, era una especie de redactor, aunque también publicaba algunos artículos «firmados»; tal vez Basil había leído algunos de sus trabajos; debía de tener menos de treinta años a pesar del cabello blanco. Era muy estimado en los ambientes periodísticos. Ella creía que era muy brillante, pero no había leído nada suyo. En realidad no leía mucho, por lo menos no

para entretenerse, fuera del *Transcript*. Creía que el señor Pardon escribía también algunas veces en *Transcript*; bueno, suponía que era muy brillante. Al otro que conocía, aunque en realidad no lo conocía (suponía que Basil pensaba que aquello era bastante extraño) era a aquel caballero alto y pálido con bigotes negros y monóculo. Lo conocía por habérselo encontrado en algunas reuniones; pero en verdad no lo conocía bien… bueno, entre otras cosas porque ella se negaba. En el caso de que él se acercara a hablarle (y parecía que él tuviera esa intención), ella solo le respondería «Sí, señor», o «No, señor», con toda frialdad. No le importaba que pensara que era una mujer seca; a *él* le convendría ser un poco más seco. ¿Qué era lo que ocurría con aquel hombre? Oh, ella pensaba que ya se lo había dicho; era un curandero mesmeriano, hacía curas milagrosas. Ella no creía en su sistema ni dejaba de creer en él; ni una cosa ni otra; lo único que sabía es que algunas señoras atendidas por él la habían llamado después a ella, y había descubierto que el doctor les había hecho perder un tiempo precioso. Él hablaba con ellas… bueno, como si ni siquiera supiese lo que les estaba diciendo. Sospechaba que carecía de toda noción de fisiología, por lo cual consideraba que no debería asumir determinadas responsabilidades. Ella no quería ser intolerante, pero pensaba que una persona debía saber algo. Suponía que Basil la consideraba demasiado despectiva; pero había sido él quien le había hecho ciertas preguntas, ella tenía que admitirlo. Lo único que podía decir era que no le gustaba que el doctor pusiera sus manos sobre ninguna de las pacientes de ella; todo lo que hacía era con las manos… es decir lo que no hacía con la lengua. Basil pudo observar que la doctora Prance estaba irritada; que aquel modo de hablar sin ningún reparo de otras personas no debía ser habitual en ella, como miembro de una profesión en que la expresión de opiniones tan fuertes por lo general levanta olas de silencio. Pero él bendijo su irritación, ya que le iluminaba tantos terrenos; y para obtener mayor provecho de ella le preguntó quién era la joven de cabellera roja… aquella tan bonita en quien él solo se había fijado durante los últimos diez minutos. Era la señorita Tarrant, la hija del curandero; ¿no había mencionado acaso el nombre de este? Era Selah Tarrant, por si alguna vez se decidía a emplear sus servicios. La doctora Prance no conocía a la joven, sabía solo que era la única hija del curandero; algo había oído hablar sobre sus dones, pero no podía recordar cuáles fueran. Oh, ya que era su hija debía, por supuesto, tener

algún don especial, aunque solo fuera el don de la charlatanería… Bueno, en realidad no había querido decir eso, sino más bien un talento para la conversación. Tal vez ella se moriría y volvería a reencarnarse, tal vez haría una demostración de sus facultades ya que nadie parecía dispuesto a actuar. Sí, parecía bastante bonita, aunque había en su aspecto ciertos indicios de anemia, y a la doctora Prance no le sorprendería que comiera demasiados bombones; Basil pensaba que su aspecto era atractivo; fue una reflexión personal, coloreada indudablemente por el prejuicio «masculino» de que aquella era la primera joven atractiva que había visto en Boston. La muchacha conversaba con algunas damas en el otro extremo del salón; tenía un gran abanico rojo que mantenía constantemente en movimiento. Desde luego no era una joven inerte; movía su abanico, se mantenía en movimiento mientras conversaba, y tenía el aire de una persona que, hiciera lo que hiciera, pensaba ya en hacer cualquier otra cosa. Si alguien la observaba con cierta atención, ella respondía a su vez con la misma atención, y sus ojos seductores se habían encontrado varias veces con los de Basil Ransom. Pero ella los dirigía más a menudo hacia la señora Farrinder, admirando la serena seguridad de la gran oradora. Era fácil ver que la muchacha admiraba a esa benefactora de la humanidad, y consideraba un privilegio estar cerca de ella. Era evidente, en efecto, que se sentía excitada por estar en medio de aquella compañía, lo que resultaba del todo comprensible si se pensaba en su reciente período de exilio en el Oeste, del que ya hemos hablado, y a consecuencia del cual esta reunión le debía parecer un retorno a la vida intelectual. Ransom secretamente deseaba que su prima —ya que el destino le tenía destinada una prima en Boston— se hubiera semejado más a aquella joven.

Ya para ese momento era perceptible cierta agitación; varias damas, impacientes por la prolongada espera, habían abandonado sus asientos para dirigirse directamente a la señora Farrinder, que estaba rodeada de un grupo de simpatizantes. La señorita Birdseye había renunciado; le había bastado con que la señora Farrinder anunciara, al ser presionada (si es que se podía decir que la anfitriona, extremadamente paciente, podía presionarla) con el argumento de la expectación general, que ella solo podía pronunciar sus mensajes a un público al que reconociera como parcialmente hostil. Allí no había hostilidad, sino, por el contrario, demasiada simpatía.

—Yo no necesito simpatía —dijo, con una sonrisa tranquila, dirigiéndose a Olive Chancellor—. Soy verdaderamente yo misma, me siento a la altura de la situación solo cuando veo erguirse frente a mí los prejuicios, el fanatismo, la injusticia, el conservadurismo, embistiéndome como un ejército. Entonces siento… siento lo que me imagino que Napoleón Bonaparte debe de haber sentido la víspera de alguna de sus grandes victorias. Debo tener frente a mí elementos hostiles. Me gusta derrotarlos.

Olive pensó en Basil Ransom y se preguntó si aquel podía ser un elemento hostil. Se lo mencionó a la señora Farrinder, quien expresó la esperanza de que si él se oponía a los principios tan caros al resto de los demás, podía ser inducido a tomar la palabra y testimoniar sus puntos de vista.

—Me sentiría feliz de poder replicarle —dijo la señora Farrinder con extrema suavidad—. Estaría encantada, en todo caso, de cambiar impresiones con él.

Olive se sintió profundamente alarmada ante la idea de un debate público entre esas dos poderosas personalidades (percibía que Ransom podía ser una personalidad poderosa), no porque dudase del feliz desarrollo, sino porque se encontraría en una falsa posición, por haber llevado allí a aquel joven ofensivo, y a ella le horrorizaban las falsas posiciones. La señorita Birdseye era incapaz de resentimiento; ella había invitado a cuarenta personas a escuchar a la señora Farrinder, y ahora la señora Farrinder se negaba a hablar. ¡Pero las razones que esgrimía eran magníficas! Había algo marcial y heroico en su pretexto, y, además, sus argumentos eran tan personales, tan sinceros, que la señorita Birdseye se sintió consolada, y se alejó, mirando a sus otros huéspedes vagamente, como si no los conociera del todo, mientras mencionaba, casualmente, las razones de su espera no gratificada, confiando, evidentemente, en que ellos estarían de acuerdo con ella.

—Por otra parte no podíamos pretender estar en desacuerdo, solo para provocarla, ¿no cree usted? —le preguntó al señor Tarrant, que permanecía sentado al lado de su mujer bastante consciente, aunque nada satisfecho, de su aislamiento de los demás asistentes.

—Bueno, no lo sé… Me imagino que todos aquí estamos de acuerdo —replicó aquel caballero dirigiendo la mirada a su alrededor y esbozando una sonrisa lenta y deliberada, que hacía que su boca pareciera enorme, dibujando a ambos lados dos

enormes arrugas, tan largas como las alas de un murciélago, y mostrando un lote de grandes, iguales y carnívoros dientes.

—Selah —dijo la mujer, poniendo una mano sobre la manga del impermeable de su marido—, me pregunto si no le interesaría a la señorita Birdseye oír a Verena.

—Si piensan ustedes que debe cantar tengo que excusarme pero no poseo un piano —se sintió en el deber de responder la señorita Birdseye. Recordó en ese momento que la joven poseía un don natural.

—No necesita un piano, no necesita nada —aclaró Selah, sin poner atención aparentemente en las palabras de su mujer. Formaba parte de su actitud ante la vida demostrar que no le debía nada a nadie, ni siquiera una sugerencia, y que nada le sorprendía ni lo tomaba desprevenido.

—Bueno, no sé si a todos les interesa el canto —dijo la señorita Birdseye, inconsciente del hecho de que debía buscar un sustituto para el entretenimiento que le había fallado.

—No se trata de canto —declaró la señora Tarrant.

—¿De qué, entonces?

Las arrugas del señor Tarrant parecieron distenderse; mostró los dientes.

—Se trata de inspiración.

La señorita Birdseye emitió una risita, vaga, breve, pero no escéptica.

—Bueno, si usted puede garantizar que…

—Pienso que resultará interesante para todos —dijo la señora Tarrant, y levantando una mano semienguantada, amistosa, hizo que se le acercara la señorita Birdseye, y entonces el matrimonio explicó, por turnos, lo que su hija era capaz de hacer.

Mientras tanto, Basil Ransom le confesaba a la doctora Prance que, después de todo, se sentía bastante desilusionado. Había esperado más del programa; quería oír algunas de las nuevas verdades. La señora Farrinder, como decía él, permanecía dentro de su tienda de campaña, y él había esperado no solo ver a aquellas distinguidas personas sino también escucharlas.

—Bueno, a mí no me han desilusionado —respondió la inmutable doctora Prance—. Si se hubiera iniciado una discusión me habría visto forzada a permanecer aquí.

—Espero que no tenga usted la intención de retirarse.

—Bueno, debo proseguir mis estudios en algún momento. No quiero que los caballeros médicos me lleven ventaja.

—Estoy seguro de que nadie logrará aventajarla. Y mire, esa muchacha tan bonita ha ido a hablarle a la señora Farrinder. Va a pedirle que le dirija al público unas cuantas palabras. La señora Farrinder no logrará resistirse.

—Bueno, entonces, me retiraré antes de que empiece. Buenas noches, señor —dijo la doctora Prance, quien ya para entonces le había comenzado a parecer a Basil Ransom más susceptible de domesticación, como si hubiera sido un pequeño animal de los bosques, un gato salvaje, una gacela atemorizada que hubiera aprendido a permanecer quieta bajo las caricias, o hasta a tender una patita. Ella proporcionaba salud y a la vez era sana; si su prima hubiera sido del mismo tipo que ella, Basil se hubiese sentido más dichoso.

—Buenas noches, doctora —replicó—. Después de todo usted no me ha dicho cuál es su opinión sobre la capacidad de las damas.

—¿Capacidad para qué? —preguntó la doctora Prance—. Por supuesto que tienen la capacidad para hacerles perder el tiempo a los demás. Yo lo único que sé es que no quiero que nadie me diga lo que una mujer es capaz de hacer.

Y se marchó en absoluto silencio, como si estuviera atravesando el corredor de un hospital, y un momento después Ransom la vio llegar a la puerta que, después de la aparición de los últimos invitados, había permanecido abierta. Se quedó allí un momento, lanzando una mirada rápida sobre toda la asamblea, como el relámpago de la linterna de un guardia nocturno, y luego rápidamente desapareció. Ransom comprendió que aquel tipo de cosas la irritaba, que la irritaba que le recordaran, aunque fuera en defensa de sus derechos, que era una mujer, detalle que ella por costumbre tendía a olvidar, teniendo ya más derechos de los que podía disfrutar por falta de tiempo. Era seguro que cualquiera que fuese el éxito que pudiera obtener a la larga el movimiento, la pequeña revolución de la doctora Prance constituía un éxito.

VII

No bien acababa de retirarse la doctora Prance cuando Olive Chancellor se acercó a Ransom con ojos que parecían decir «No me importa que estés aquí o no… Yo me siento perfectamente». Pero lo que sus labios pronunciaron fue algo mucho más amable; le preguntó si podía tener el placer de presentarlo a la señora Farrinder. Ransom asintió con su galantería sureña, y un momento después la señora lo recibía en medio del círculo que para entonces la rodeaba. Para ella esa era una buena ocasión de justificar su reputación de elegancia, y debe decirse con toda imparcialidad que le produjo a Ransom la impresión de tener una dignidad en la conversación y un bello estilo que no hubiera podido ser superado por ninguna de las hijas, ni siquiera entre las de mayor refinamiento, de sus propias regiones. Parecía saber que él no sentía un gran entusiasmo por los cambios que ella exigía, y deseaba mostrarle, especialmente por ser un sureño que había mordido el polvo, que el sexo femenino podía ser magnánimo. Este conocimiento de la secreta herejía de Basil Ransom le pareció a este también reflejado en el rostro de las otras damas, cuyas miradas circunspectas (ya que no les había sido presentado) parecían considerarla más como una desgracia que como una vergüenza. Sentía sobre él los ojos de todas aquellas señoras maduras, contemplaba los rizos más bien desmadejados, que colgaban de aquellos sombreritos oscuros, sus cabezas inclinadas hacia delante, por la costumbre de estar esperando o escuchando algo; podía ver que ninguna de ellas era brillante ni alegre, ninguna, salvo la joven que había visto antes, quien tenía una cabeza genial, y que ahora se encontraba como al margen de aquel cónclave. Sus miradas volvieron a encontrarse; ella también lo observaba atentamente. Se le ocurrió que la señora Farrinder, a la que su prima debió de haberlo presentado de una manera maligna, podía tal vez desafiarlo a combatir, y se preguntaba

si realmente estaba preparado (en verdad se sentía de lo más incómodo) para hacer honor a semejante desafío. Si ella arrojaba el guante sobre el tema de la templanza le parecía que podría recogerlo, pues la idea de que se tratara de resolver tal asunto por medio de una legislación lo llenaba de cólera; el gusto del alcohol le resultaba excelente y tenía la firme convicción de que la civilización misma corría peligro si caía en las garras de una horda de mujeres vociferantes (no hago sino registrar algunos de sus iracundos términos) que le impidieran a un caballero probar una copa. La señora Farrinder le demostró que no tenía la ansiedad de quien se siente inseguro; le preguntó si no podría informar a la asamblea allí reunida sobre las condiciones sociales y políticas del Sur. Él pidió que se le excusara, expresando a la vez el alto honor que se le hacía con semejante solicitud, mientras interiormente se reía ante el pensamiento de improvisar una conferencia en aquel salón. Volvió a sonreír cuando creyó interpretar el significado de la mirada que le dirigió la señorita Chancellor: «¡Después de todo, ni para esto resultas útil!». ¡Hablar del Sur ante aquellos fulanos! ¡Jamás habrían podido imaginarse lo poco que le interesaba hacerlo! Sentía una ternura apasionada por su país, se sentía atado a él por un lazo tan íntimo que le hubiera impedido narrar sus confidencias a un grupo de fanáticos norteños; hubiera sido como leerles las cartas de su madre o de su amante. Mantener la reserva hacia las tierras del Sur, no empañarlas con el roce de manos vulgares, dejarlas en paz con sus heridas y sus recuerdos, sin poner en el mercado sus problemas o sus esperanzas, sino esperar todo lo que un hombre pudiera esperar, el lento proceso, la benéfica acción del tiempo, tal era el deseo más profundo de Ransom, y se daba perfectamente cuenta de lo poco que esos pensamientos hubieran logrado entretener a los huéspedes de la señorita Birdseye.

—Sabemos muy poco sobre las mujeres del Sur; se mantienen en el silencio más absoluto —comentó la señora Farrinder—. ¿Hasta qué punto podemos contar con ellas? ¿En qué número sostendrían nuestras banderas? Me han recomendado no dar conferencias en las ciudades del Sur.

—Ah, señora, ha sido en verdad un consejo muy cruel… para nosotros —exclamó Basil Ransom con galantería.

—Yo tuve un público magnífico la primavera pasada en Saint Louis —anunció una voz fresca, por encima de las cabezas del grupo reunido en torno a la conferenciante;

cuando Basil Ransom se volvió, como todos los demás, para saber de quién procedía, reveló ser de la graciosa pelirroja.

Esta se había ruborizado un poco por el esfuerzo de hacer esta declaración y seguía allí de pie, sonriendo a su auditorio. La señora Farrinder se dirigió hacia ella con una expresión benévola, no obstante estar evidentemente sorprendida.

—¿Ah, sí? ¿Y sobre qué habló usted, mi querida señorita?

—Sobre la historia pasada, la condición actual y las perspectivas futuras de nuestro sexo.

—Bueno, Saint Louis no es precisamente el Sur —dijo una de las damas.

—Estoy seguro de que esta joven alcanzaría igual éxito en Charleston o en Nueva Orleans —intervino Basil Ransom.

—Sí, a mí me hubiera gustado ir todavía más allá —continuó la joven—, pero no tenía amigos. Tengo amigos solo en Saint Louis.

—No los hubiera usted necesitado de ninguna manera —dijo la señora Farrinder, en un tono que, esta vez, dejaba muy bien sentada su reputación—. Yo conozco muy bien la lealtad del público de Saint Louis.

—Después de esto, permítame presentarle a la señorita Tarrant; se muere por conocerla a usted, señora Farrinder.

Estas palabras surgieron de la boca de uno de los caballeros, el joven de cabello blanco, que le había sido mencionado a Ransom por la doctora Prance como un célebre periodista. También él había permanecido marginado hasta ese momento, pero en ese instante se acercó al grupo (varias damas le abrieron paso) acompañando a la hija del mesmeriano.

Esta sonrió y volvió a ruborizarse; su rubor era del color de rosa más delicado. Parecía ser muy joven, esbelta y graciosa, y la señora Farrinder la hizo sentar junto a ella en el sofá, en el lugar que Olive había abandonado.

—He deseado tanto conocerla; la admiro muchísimo. Tenía esperanzas de escucharla esta noche. Es maravilloso poder verla, señora Farrinder. —Así se expresaba mientras el resto del grupo observaba la escena, con algo de alivio—. Por supuesto no puede usted saber quién soy; soy tan solo una muchacha que desea agradecerle todo lo que ha hecho por nosotras. Porque usted nos ha hablado tanto… tanto… —Y en ese instante

vaciló un poco, mirando con ojos de entusiasmo al resto del grupo, y encontrando una vez más la mirada de Basil Ransom.

—Tanto a ustedes como a las mujeres adultas —concluyó alegremente la señora Farrinder—. Me parece que logra usted expresarse perfectamente.

—Habla maravillosamente… Si tan solo le permitieran dirigirnos unas cuantas palabras —comentó el joven que la había presentado—. Se trata de un estilo nuevo, bastante original —añadió.

Permaneció con los brazos cruzados, sonriendo y admirando su obra, el encuentro de las dos damas, con una sonrisa; y Basil Ransom recordó lo que le había dicho la doctora Prance, y como conocía por propia experiencia en Nueva York ciertas fuentes que alimentan los diarios, comprendió de inmediato que aquel joven estaba olfateando ya el material para un artículo.

—Querida niña, si deseas tomar la palabra, llamaré al orden a los presentes —dijo la señora Farrinder.

La joven la miró con candor y confianza extraordinarios.

—Si solo pudiera oírla antes, solo para entrar en la atmósfera.

—Pero si yo no desprendo atmósfera. No es ese el tipo de atractivo que me interesa cultivar. Para mí lo importante son los hechos… Los hechos puros —respondió la señora Farrinder—. ¿Me ha oído usted alguna vez? Si es así ya sabrá lo escueto que es mi estilo.

—¿Que si la he oído? Me he alimentado de sus palabras. Para mí ha sido fundamental verla. Pregúntele a mi madre si no es así.

Se había expresado desde el primer minuto con una tal fluidez y seguridad que daba casi la impresión de estar recitando una lección previamente ensayada. Y sin embargo había en sus modales una extraña espontaneidad y un aire de entusiasmo natural, de pureza personal. Si algo había de teatral era una teatralidad natural. Contemplaba a la señora Farrinder con los ojos sonrientes cargados de emoción. Esta dama había sido el objeto de numerosas ovaciones; le resultaba pues natural que todos los corazones femeninos palpitasen por ella; pero era inconfundible que estaba sorprendida por esta imprevista encarnación de la gratitud y de la elocuencia, y sus ojos contemplaron a la muchacha con cierta reserva, mientras, en lo más profundo de su ser, se preguntaba si la

señorita Tarrant sería una joven notable o simplemente una arrivista. Encontró una respuesta que parecía eludir cualquier decisión al respecto; lo único que dijo fue:

—Tenemos necesidad de gente joven; por supuesto que tenemos necesidad de gente joven.

—¿Quién es esta criatura encantadora? —oyó Basil Ransom preguntar a su prima, en un tono grave, apagado, a Matthias Pardon, el joven que había hecho la presentación de la señorita Tarrant.

No sabía si la señorita Chancellor lo conocía, o si su curiosidad la había impulsado a ser audaz. Ransom estaba cerca de la pareja, así que pudo beneficiarse con la respuesta del señor Pardon.

—Es Verena, la hija del doctor Tarrant, el médico mesmeriano. Es una oradora de primer rango.

—¿Qué quiere usted decir? —preguntó Olive—. ¿Da conferencias en público?

—Por supuesto. Ha tenido un gran éxito en el Oeste. La primavera pasada pude oírla en Topeka. La consideran como una inspirada. No sé lo que eso sea, solo puedo decir que es exquisita, ¡tan fresca, tan poética! Tiene que estar presente su padre para que pueda hablar. Parece que es él quien le transmite la inspiración. —Y el señor Pardon se permitió hacer un ademán que pretendía significar ese tránsito de inspiración.

Olive Chancellor respondió con un profundo suspiro de impaciencia y volvió a observar a la muchacha, que ahora tenía entre las suyas una mano de la señora Farrinder y le suplicaba que hiciera solo una pequeña introducción.

—Quisiera tener un punto de partida… saber en qué sitio me encuentro —dijo—. Solo dos o tres de sus grandes pensamientos.

Basil estaba de pie muy cerca de su prima; le hizo una observación sobre lo graciosa que era Verena. Ella se volvió hacia él instantáneamente, lo observó con desprecio antes de responder:

—¿Le parece? —Para añadir un momento después—: ¡Cómo debe usted de odiar este lugar!

—No ahora que vamos a tener al fin un poco de diversión —respondió Ransom de buen humor, aunque con cierta rudeza; y su declaración dio en el blanco porque en ese

momento reapareció la señorita Birdseye, seguida por el curandero mesmeriano y su mujer.

—Bueno, bueno, veo que ya la está usted persuadiendo —le dijo la señorita Birdseye a la señora Farrinder; y ante el pensamiento de que hubiese sido necesaria esta comedia Basil Ransom no pudo resistir un ataque de hilaridad, un espasmo que significaba que para él la diversión había comenzado y que le valió otra grave mirada de la señorita Chancellor. La señorita Verena le parecía tan «persuadida» a mostrarse como podría estarlo cualquier muchacha de su edad—. Este es su padre, el doctor Tarrant. Posee virtudes extraordinarias. Y esta es su madre, es hija de Abraham Greenstreet.

La señorita Birdseye estaba segura de que a la señora Farrinder le interesaría conocer a esas personas; a ella no le gustaba perder esas oportunidades, aunque las condiciones no fueran del todo favorables. Y luego la señorita Birdseye se dirigió a los asistentes, ampliando el círculo como para reunir a aquellos que permanecían aislados, considerando que después de todo era una fortuna contar con una doncella vagamente inspirada para suplir a las grandes celebridades cuando estas se volvían temperamentales. Y fue precisamente debido a esas oscilaciones de su temperamento —al lector le resultará seguramente difícil seguir esas oscilaciones del genio de la señora Farrinder— por lo que decidió en ese momento pronunciar unas cuantas palabras a fin de que la anfitriona pudiera comentar ante el público que sería delicioso oír a las representantes de dos escuelas, la tradicional y la nueva.

—Bueno, tal vez Verena los desilusione —dijo la señora Tarrant con un aire de resignación dolorosa, y sentándose, envuelta en su mantón, en el borde de una silla, queriendo demostrar que por lo menos ella estaba ya preparada para oír, aunque otras personas continuaran charlando.

—No se trata de mí, mamá —respondió Verena con dulce gravedad, separándose de la señora Farrinder y sentándose con la mirada pensativa fija en el suelo.

Con todo el respeto debido a la señora Tarrant, hubo todavía un poco más de conversación en la sala, ya que la joven no se sentía suficientemente preparada. La señorita Birdseye advirtió esto, pero se sentía incapaz de remediarlo, así que dirigiéndose a todos los presentes con sus modos familiares, hizo una breve y amable

alocución, en la que de vez en cuando hacía su aparición Abraham Greenstreet, en la que se detallaron algunas de las curas milagrosas del doctor Tarrant, carentes solo de los hechos reales, y en la cual los éxitos de Verena en el Oeste fueron relatados, sin caer en el énfasis o la hipérbole, vicios a los que la señorita Birdseye jamás se abandonaba, sino como maravillas aceptadas y reconocidas, naturales en una era de nuevas revelaciones. Había oído hablar de esas cosas solo diez minutos antes a los padres de la joven, pero su alma hospitalaria no había requerido sino un momento para sumergirse en ellos y asimilarlos. Si su relato no era demasiado lúcido había que excusarla pues era imposible tener una idea de Verena Tarrant hasta que no la hubiese uno escuchado, y aún más imposible resultaba transmitir esa idea a los demás. La señora Farrinder estaba notoriamente irritada; parecía haber decidido, después de una primera duda, que la familia Tarrant era extravagante y poco seria. Miraba con frialdad a Selah y a su mujer; parecía considerarlos como una compañía de charlatanes.

—Levántese y díganos lo que tiene que decir —ordenó, con cierta dureza, a Verena, que solo levantó los ojos para posarlos en ella, en silencio, con la misma dulzura, y luego en su padre.

Este caballero pareció responder a un impulso irresistible; miró a su alrededor a todos los presentes, mostró los dientes y dijo que los elogiosos comentarios de la señorita Birdseye no le resultaban tan embarazosos como podría creerse, ya que cualquier triunfo de él y de su hija los consideraba como algo absolutamente impersonal; insistió en esa palabra. Ya la habían oído cuando dijo: «No se trata de mí, mamá», pues tanto él como la señora Tarrant y la misma joven eran igualmente conscientes de que no se trataba de ella. Era una especie de poder externo, que parecía fluir a través de ella; no podía pretender saber por qué su hija había sido elegida en vez de cualquier otra persona. Pero el hecho es que había sido elegida. Era suficiente con que él le pusiera las manos encima en un estado de recogimiento y la inspiración llegaba instantáneamente. En el Oeste habían descubierto que aquella inspiración tomaba la forma de una elocuencia considerable. Verena había hablado con gran facilidad ante públicos cultivados y de gran refinamiento intelectual. Había expuesto con simpatía el movimiento por la emancipación de la mujer de toda clase de servidumbres; aquel había sido su interés principal desde muy pequeña (debía

mencionar que a los nueve años había bautizado a su muñeca favorita con el nombre de Eliza P. Moseley, en memoria de aquella gran pionera a la que todos reverenciaban), y ahora la inspiración, si es que podía llamarse así, se encauzaba en tal sentido. La voz que hablaba por sus labios deseaba asumir aquella lucha. Parecía que era imposible que tocara otro tema. Verena solo dejaba que la voz fluyera, sin pretender establecer sobre ella ningún dominio. Ellos podían juzgar por su cuenta si no se trataba de un fenómeno excepcional. Por eso se atrevía a hablar de su hija en esos términos, ante aquella asamblea de damas y caballeros; porque ellos no creían tener ningún mérito, sino que se comunicaban con un poder que venía del exterior. Si Verena consideraba que esa noche podía sentir el estímulo, estaba seguro de que el espectáculo resultaría interesante para los demás. Solo era necesario guardar unos cuantos minutos de silencio, mientras ella escuchaba la voz.

Varias damas declararon que para ellas sería un verdadero deleite. Esperaban que la señorita Tarrant se encontrara en condiciones favorables. A la vez otras personas las rebatieron para recordarles que no se trataba de ella; sus condiciones no interesaban, y un caballero añadió que estaba seguro de que muchos de los allí presentes habían conversado con Eliza P. Moseley. Mientras tanto Verena, cada vez más concentrada, pero absolutamente imperturbable a pesar de la discusión pública sobre sus facultades místicas, volvió a dirigirse con gran afabilidad a la señora Farrinder para pedirle que diera el primer paso y que así le infundiera un poco de valor. Ya para ese momento la señora Farrinder había llegado al colmo de su malhumor; y respondió a su graciosa suplicante con la arrogancia de Juno. Desaprobaba totalmente la breve introducción del doctor Tarrant, y se sentía cada vez menos dispuesta a que se la asociara con un hacedor de milagros. Abraham Greenstreet estaba muy bien, pero Abraham Greenstreet yacía en la tumba; y Eliza P. Moseley, después de todo, había sido demasiado tibia. Basil Ransom se preguntó si sería desvergüenza o candor lo que le permitía a la señorita Tarrant resistir con tanta gracia la altivez de la otra dama. En ese momento oyó a Olive Chancellor, sobre su hombro, con un nervioso temblor en la voz, que exclamó repentinamente:

—¡Por favor, comencemos, comencemos! Una voz, una voz humana, es lo que necesitamos.

—Hablaré después de usted, y si se trata de un fraude la desenmascararé —dijo la señora Farrinder. Su tono era más majestuoso que irónico.

—Estoy segura de que aquí todos somos gente seria, como dice el doctor Tarrant. Ahora lo mejor será callar —observó la señorita Birdseye.

VIII

Verena Tarrant se levantó y se dirigió hacia su padre, que estaba en el centro de la sala; Olive Chancellor se abrió paso en medio de la gente y volvió a ocupar su sitio al lado de la señora Farrinder, el sitio en el sofá que la muchacha había abandonado, mientras los otros invitados de la señorita Birdseye se acomodaban cuidadosamente en los asientos, o permanecían de pie apoyados contra la pared. Verena tomó las manos de su padre, sin mirarlo a la cara, con los ojos dirigidos hacia la asamblea; un instante después su madre se puso de pie y con un extraño suspiro se levantó de la silla donde hasta entonces había permanecido sentada. Alguien le buscó otro asiento, mientras Verena, llevada de la mano de su padre, se sentó en la silla que este le señalaba. Permaneció sentada allí, con los ojos cerrados, mientras el padre ponía las manos largas y huesudas sobre su cabeza. Basil Ransom observó estos preparativos con mucho interés, pues la muchacha le divertía y le gustaba. Tenía más color que cualquiera de las otras personas allí reunidas, como si todo lo que de brillante hubiese podido existir en la colección humana más bien alicaída y opaca de la señorita Birdseye se resumiera en aquella atractiva y ambigua joven. En cambio no había nada ambiguo en su padre; Ransom sencillamente lo había detestado desde el momento en que abrió la boca; le era inmensamente familiar, es decir, no él sino su tipo; era sencillamente un detestable aventurero del Norte. Era falso, astuto, vulgar e innoble; la especie más barata del mercado humano. Era bastante desconcertante saber que era el padre de aquella joven delicada y bonita y al parecer inteligente. La madre, pálida y robusta, que permanecía sentada en un rincón, tenía más el aspecto de una dama; pero si lo era, entonces resultaba mucho más vergonzoso que se hubiera casado con aquella especie de lacayo, se dijo Ransom, haciendo uso, según su costumbre, de términos de

oprobio extraídos de la antigua literatura inglesa. A menudo se había encontrado con los Tarrant o sus equivalentes; los había flagelado siempre, por lo menos eso creía, en mil y una polémicas sostenidas durante las asambleas políticas en las destruidas ciudades del Sur, durante el terrible período de la reconstrucción. Si la señora Farrinder consideraba a Verena como una farsante, debía concedérsele alguna excusa, ya que la misma impresión le había producido la joven a Basil Ransom. Nunca antes había visto una mezcla semejante de elementos extraños; su cara era dulce y angelical, y sin embargo, había en ella algo exhibicionista, como si perteneciera a alguna *troupe* o viviera entre candilejas, que se transparentaba hasta en los menores detalles de su atavío, confeccionado evidentemente con el propósito de obtener efectos teatrales. Si en ese momento hubiese sacado un par de castañuelas o un tamborcillo, él habría considerado que tales accesorios estaban perfectamente de acuerdo con el resto.

La pequeña doctora Prance había observado, con su robusto sentido común, que Verena era un poco anémica, y había insinuado que era una impostora. Sin embargo tenía ahora que demostrar el valor de su exhibición, pero en efecto era muy pálida, blanca como son siempre las mujeres que tienen ese tono rojizo en el cabello; por lo general parece que la sangre se les ha escapado. Sin embargo la belleza de la joven no tenía nada de mortecino; era fuerte y flexible, tenía ojos espléndidos y labios de color muy vivo, sus trenzas, recogidas en un complicado nudo, parecían irradiar el brillo de su naturaleza. Sus ojos eran extraños, luminosos y límpidos (su sonrisa parecía un reflejo de algo, el brillo de una piedra preciosa), y, aunque no era alta, lo parecía por el modo erguido en que levantaba la cabeza. Ransom hubiera creído que era una oriental si no fuera porque la tez de las orientales es más oscura, y si hubiera tenido una cabra la hubiera podido tomar por Esmeralda, aunque no tenía sino una idea muy vaga de quién pudiera ser Esmeralda. Llevaba puesto un ligero vestido marrón, cortado de una manera fantástica, con una chaquetilla amarilla y una gran franja carmesí alrededor del talle; en torno al cuello tenía un collar de ámbar de dos hilos, que le llegaba hasta el busto apenas pronunciado. Hay que añadir que, a pesar de su aspecto melodramático, nada hacía creer que su exhibición, fuera del tipo que fuese, pudiera resultar melodramática. Se mantenía muy tranquila ya para ese momento (había cerrado el amplio abanico) y su padre continuaba el misterioso proceso de serenarla. Ransom se

preguntaba si no estaría tratando de hacerla dormir; durante algunos minutos los ojos de la muchacha permanecieron cerrados; oyó que una dama sentada cerca de él, familiarizada por lo visto con aquellas sesiones, comentó que estaba a punto de entrar en trance. Por el momento la exhibición no tenía nada de excitante, aunque desde luego era bastante agradable tener frente a sí a una muchacha tan bonita como si fuera una estatua viva. El doctor Tarrant no miraba a nadie mientras colocaba a su hija en aquel estado de pasividad, sus ojos permanecían fijos en una esquina de la sala y él sonreía hacia arriba, como hacia una imaginaria galería.

—Calma, calma… —susurraba—, ya va a venir, niñita, ya vendrá, déjalo trabajar, déjalo que se concrete. El espíritu, ya lo sabes; debes dejar que el espíritu llegue cuando quiera.

De vez en cuando levantaba los brazos, como para liberarlos de las mangas de su largo impermeable, que le caían sobre las manos. Basil Ransom observaba atentamente las diversas fases de esta operación y descubrió también, del lado opuesto, la cara ansiosa de su prima, con la mirada fija sobre los ojos cerrados de la joven profetisa. Al final comenzó a sentir impaciencia, no por el retardo de la famosa voz (aunque ya había pasado bastante tiempo desde el momento en que comenzaron los preparativos) sino por la irritación que aquellas maniobras de Tarrant le producían, que le molestaban como si él mismo estuviera experimentando su contacto y que le parecían una deshonra para aquella pasiva doncella. Se puso nervioso, se encolerizó, y solo después se preguntó qué le importaba aquello, pues hasta un charlatán tenía el derecho de hacer lo que le viniera en gana con su hija. Se sintió aliviado cuando Verena se levantó de la silla, con un movimiento para que Tarrant se hiciera a un lado, como si su función hubiera cesado. La joven permaneció en su sitio como ausente, seria y sin mirar a nadie; después de una breve pausa comenzó a hablar.

Comenzó a hacerlo con frases incoherentes, casi inaudibles, como si estuviera hablando en sueños. Ransom no podía entender lo que decía; pensó que aquello era muy extraño y se preguntó qué habría opinado al respecto la doctora Prance.

—Está solo ordenando sus ideas, y tratando de entrar en contacto; pronto estará perfectamente.

Ransom oyó este comentario en voz baja hecho por el curandero mesmeriano; «en contacto» era aparentemente la traducción de Tarrant de *en rapport*. Su profecía se cumplió, y Verena se recuperó después de un momento; se recuperó de la manera más dulce, con un efecto bastante singular. Lo hizo lenta, cautelosamente, como si estuviera escuchando el dictado, atrapando, una a una, ciertas frases que le eran dictadas desde una gran distancia, más allá de los confines del mundo. Luego la memoria, o la inspiración, llegó a ella, y se adueñó de su papel. Lo desempeñó con una naturalidad y una gracia extraordinarias; diez minutos después Ransom fue consciente de que todo el público, la señora Farrinder, la señorita Chancellor y hasta él, el reacio nativo de Mississippi, estaban subyugados por el encanto de Verena. Digo diez minutos aunque a decir verdad el joven había perdido todo el sentido del tiempo. Más tarde se preguntaría durante cuánto tiempo habría hablado; calculó que debió de haber sido una media hora. Lo que dijo a él no le importaba, apenas entendía el sentido. Pero intuía que debía de referirse a la bondad y a la delicadeza de las mujeres, a cómo, durante largos períodos de la historia, habían sido pisoteadas por la bota de hierro de los hombres. Era algo referente a la igualdad, tal vez incluso (él no era del todo consciente) a la superioridad de su género. Era algo referente al tan deseado advenimiento del día en que todas se sentirían hermanas, sobre sus deberes para consigo mismas y hacia las demás. Ese tipo de temas; y Basil Ransom pudo convencerse de que sus argumentos no arruinaban el efecto producido. El efecto no estaba en lo que decía, aunque todas esas cosas hubieran sido agradables, sino en su persona, en su aspecto adolescente (de vez en cuando jugueteaba con su abanico rojo), en la visible frescura y pureza de aquella prueba. Una vez que adquirió confianza, Verena abrió los ojos y su luminosa dulzura redobló el aspecto de su discurso. Este estaba colmado de expresiones escolares, de trozos de oratoria que recordaba de otros discursos, de incoherencias y pueriles faltas de lógica, de vuelos fantasiosos que debieron de ser muy aplaudidos en Topeka; pero Ransom pensó que aunque lo que dijera hubiese sido peor, el éxito habría sido el mismo, ya que el argumento y las doctrinas expuestas no tenían la menor importancia. Se trataba sencillamente de una exhibición intensamente personal, y la persona que la llevaba a efecto era fascinante. Ella podía ofender el gusto de determinadas personas; Ransom podía imaginar que en

ciertos círculos de Boston podría considerársela una coqueta; pero en lo que a él se refería, se daba cuenta de que ella obtenía una respuesta contundente de parte de sus sentidos sedientos. Era un conservador acendrado, y su mente estaba bien acorazada contra la futilidad de lo que ella predicaba: los derechos y sacrificios de las mujeres, la igualdad de los sexos, el histerismo que alimentaba todos los convencionalismos, la futura necesidad del sufragio, la perspectiva de las madres inscritas en el Senado nacional. Nada de aquello importaba: ella no quería decir eso, ni siquiera sabía qué significaban aquellos términos, todo le había sido dictado por el padre; no tenía mayor o menor intención de decir eso en vez de otra cosa; las necesidades de su naturaleza no se expresaban en la necesidad de conseguir adeptos a una causa, sino de emitir aquellas agradables notas de su voz y efectuar aquellos libres modales juveniles, sacudir su rizada cabellera como una náyade que surge de las olas, encantar a la persona que se encontrara a su lado y ser feliz al encantarla. No sé si Ransom comprendía bien el significado que podía tener una interpretación como la suya, que le atribuía a la señorita Tarrant una vacuidad de carácter especial; él se conformaba con creer que era tan inocente como encantadora, y en considerarla como se considera a una cantante de facultades superiores condenada a cantar mala música. ¡Sin embargo, qué hermosamente hacía sonar aquellas melodías!

—Por supuesto me dirijo solo a las mujeres, a mis propias hermanas queridas, y no a los hombres, porque no espero que a ellos les agrade lo que digo. Pretenden admirarnos mucho, pero a mí me gustaría que nos admirasen menos y confiaran un poco más en nosotras. No sé qué les hemos hecho para que nos mantengan al margen de todos los asuntos. Hemos confiado en ellos demasiado, y creo que ha llegado el momento de juzgarlos; sostengo que es la hora de declarar que no creemos que por habernos mantenido marginadas hayan llegado a alcanzar metas importantes. Cuando contemplo el mundo que me rodea, y el estado en que los hombres lo han sumido, confieso que me digo a mí misma: «Bien, si hubiésemos sido las mujeres quienes hubiésemos creado estas situaciones, me gustaría ver cómo seríamos juzgadas por los hombres». Cuando advierto la tenebrosa miseria que aflige a la humanidad y pienso en los sufrimientos que a cada hora, a cada momento, llenan el mundo, pienso que si esto es lo mejor que han logrado hacer los hombres por su cuenta, hubiera sido mejor que nos dieran una

oportunidad y ver qué cosas seríamos capaces de hacer nosotras. ¿No os parece que la situación no podía ser peor que en estos momentos? Si nosotras hubiésemos llegado solo a alcanzar esto no tendríamos nada de que vanagloriarnos. Pobreza, ignorancia y crimen; enfermedad, maldad y guerras. Guerras, siempre guerras, cada vez más y más. Sangre, sangre… ¡El mundo está sumergido en un océano de sangre! Matarnos unos a otros, con toda clase de instrumentos costosos, esa es la cosa más brillante que ellos han logrado inventar. Me parece que debemos detenerlos, que debemos inventar algo mejor. La crueldad… la crueldad; ¡hay ya tanta!, ¡tanta! ¿Por qué no podría reinar la ternura? ¿Por qué la dulzura que inunda el corazón de nosotras, las mujeres, tiene que perderse sin sentido, mientras que entretanto las prisiones, los ejércitos y los sufrimientos sin alivio aumentan constantemente? Yo soy una muchacha, una simple muchacha americana, y por supuesto no he visto mucho, hay muchas cosas en la vida sobre las que nada sé. Pero hay ciertas cosas que siento… me parece que he nacido para sentirlas, las oigo por las noches, las veo ante mi cara en las visiones de la oscuridad. Son las visiones de lo que la gran fraternidad universal de las mujeres podría lograr si unieran sus manos, si elevaran sus voces por encima del tumulto brutal de este mundo, donde tan difícil resulta que las súplicas de piedad y de justicia, los gemidos de los débiles y de los sufrientes sean escuchados. Nosotros lograríamos apaciguarlos, y el sonido de nuestros labios se convertiría en la voz de la paz universal. Por esto debemos confiar unas en otras, debemos ser sinceras, afables y bondadosas. Debemos recordar que el mundo es también nuestro, nuestro, aunque se nos permita decir tan poco sobre cualquier tema, y que no ha quedado definitivamente decidido que este sea un lugar de injusticia en vez de un lugar de amor.

La joven terminó con estas palabras su arenga, y al finalizar no se dejó caer exhausta en alguna silla, ni se entregó a ninguna otra forma de clímax. Lo único que hizo fue dirigirse a su madre, sonriendo sobre el hombro a todos los invitados, sin sonrojarse ni emitir ningún suspiro profundo. Era evidente que aquella representación no le había presentado ninguna dificultad; parecía casi una impertinencia que no diera muestras de fatiga ante aquel esfuerzo que había producido un efecto tan profundo en sus oyentes. Ransom soltó una alegre carcajada, que reprimió inmediatamente, ante el espectáculo dulcemente grotesco de aquella criatura virginal predicando a un grupo de personas

mayores sobre los efectos del «amor», ya que con esa nota había cerrado su alocución. Fue el toque más encantador de toda la escena, y la prueba más total de su inocencia. Había tenido un éxito inmenso, y la señora Tarrant, que la tomó en sus brazos y la besó, era por supuesto capaz de advertir que el público no se sentía defraudado. Todos parecían estar muy conmovidos; aquí y allá algunos auditores prorrumpían en exclamaciones y murmullos. Selah Tarrant continuó conversando ostentosamente con sus vecinos, moviendo lentamente sus largos dedos y mirando nuevamente hacia un rincón, como si las brillantes dotes de su hija no lograran sorprenderlo, a él que la había escuchado en ocasiones aún más memorables, y que, sobre todo, recordaba que se trataba de una virtud impersonal. La señorita Birdseye miraba a sus invitados sin poder ocultar su entusiasmo; sus amplias y suaves mejillas estaban bañadas de lágrimas. El joven Pardon comentó, cerca de Ransom, que él conocía partidos que, de haber asistido a aquella sesión, hubieran querido acaparar a la señorita Verena como oradora para la campaña de invierno, ofreciéndole grandes sumas de dinero. Y Ransom también lo oyó añadir en voz baja:

—Alguien obtendrá mucho dinero con esa muchacha. Ustedes van a ver cómo pronto hará carrera.

En cuanto a nuestro joven de Mississippi, guardó en su interior las agradables sensaciones recibidas, y solo se preguntó si podría pedirle a la señorita Birdseye que le presentara a la heroína de la velada. No inmediatamente, por supuesto, ya que el joven mezclaba a su orgullo sureño una timidez que a menudo lo hacía pasar como un joven lleno de humildad. Sabía perfectamente que era un extranjero en esa casa y estaba dispuesto a esperar a cubrir sus deseos cuando los demás hubieran terminado de felicitar a la joven, lo que ella valoraría más, por supuesto, que cualquier cosa que él pudiera decirle. El episodio había impartido animación a la asamblea; hasta cierta alegría, que se manifestaba en el brío de las conversaciones, parecía flotar en el ambiente. La gente circulaba con mayor libertad y Verena Tarrant estaba oculta por las filas de nuevos amigos que la rodeaban.

—Bueno, jamás he oído a nadie expresarse de ese modo —oyó Ransom que exclamaba una de las damas presentes; a lo que otra replicaba que lo que más le

extrañaba es que ninguna de sus brillantes oradoras hubiera expuesto antes esos argumentos.

—Desde luego hay que recordar que es un don de la naturaleza, de eso no me cabe la menor duda.

—Por mí lo pueden llamar como gusten, lo que es cierto es que es un placer escucharla.

Estos tributos entusiastas surgían de los labios de dos caballeros muy ancianos. También pudo escuchar Ransom que si ellos tuvieran unas cuantas colaboradoras como aquella pronto todos los asuntos lograrían resolverse, y oyó también responder que no podían esperar contar con demasiadas. El estilo era absolutamente personal. Todos estuvieron de acuerdo en que se trataba de un estilo personal, era precisamente la peculiaridad de la señorita Tarrant lo que podía explicar su éxito.

IX

Ransom volvió a acercarse a la señora Farrinder, que permanecía sentada en el sofá al lado de Olive Chancellor; y cuando ella dirigió hacia él su rostro pudo advertir que también ella había sufrido el contagio general. Sus ojos penetrantes brillaban y sobre sus mejillas de matrona se había difundido un brillante color; evidentemente había decidido ya la línea de conducta que debía adoptar. Olive Chancellor permanecía inmóvil en su sitio, con los ojos fijos en el suelo, con la expresión rígida y alarmada que asumía en los momentos de nerviosa desconfianza. No dio señales de notar que su pariente se acercaba. El joven le dirigió algunas frases a la señora Farrinder, frases que daban solo una pálida idea de la admiración que sentía por Verena; y la señora le respondió, con mucha calma, que no debían maravillarse de que la muchacha hablara tan bien: defendía después de todo una causa justa.

—Es además muy graciosa, y tiene un buen dominio del idioma; su padre dice que se trata de un don natural.

Ransom advirtió que era imposible poder descubrir la opinión real de la señora Farrinder, y el disimulo de ella lo confirmó en su opinión de que se trataba de una mujer muy astuta. De cualquier manera no era asunto suyo saber si aquella mujer consideraba a Verena como un papagayo o como un genio; solo comprendió que ella la consideraba una ayuda efectiva para su causa. Por un momento se quedó casi anonadado, pues se dijo que si aquella mujer tomaba bajo su custodia a la muchacha terminaría por arruinarla, ya que podría hacerla forzar la nota y convertirla en una gesticuladora bulliciosa. Pero pronto apartó de sí esta visión, refugiándose en una conversación mecánica con su prima, a quien le preguntó su opinión sobre la señorita Tarrant. Olive no respondió; mantenía la cabeza gacha, observando la alfombra con

aire absorto. La señora Farrinder observó la escena, y luego le dijo a Ransom, con voz serena:

—Ustedes elogian siempre a las damas del Sur, pero ha tenido que venir usted al Norte para ver a una gacela humana. La señorita Tarrant pertenece a la mejor estirpe de Nueva Inglaterra… ¡La que yo considero la mejor!

—Por lo que conozco de las damas de Boston estoy seguro de que ninguna manifestación de gracia podría ya sorprenderme —replicó Ransom, mirando, con una sonrisa, a su prima.

—Le ha producido una profunda impresión —explicó la señora Farrinder, bajando ligeramente la voz, pues Olive, al parecer, permanecía aún muda.

En aquel momento se acercó la señorita Birdseye; quería saber si la señora Farrinder no deseaba dirigir algunas palabras a la señorita Tarrant, en nombre de todos los presentes, por el estímulo que acababan de recibir de ella. La señora Farrinder aceptó, dijo que hablaría con placer, solo que primero le deberían permitir beber un vaso de agua. La señorita Birdseye respondió que se lo llevarían en un momento; una de las asistentes había pedido agua y el señor Pardon había bajado a traerla. Basil aprovechó esta interrupción para pedirle a la señorita Birdseye si podía concederle el gran honor de serle presentado a la señorita Verena.

—La señora Farrinder le dará las gracias en nombre de todos los presentes —dijo con una sonrisa—, pero me gustaría dárselas personalmente.

La señorita Birdseye manifestó la mejor disposición para satisfacer sus deseos; estaba muy contenta de que él hubiese quedado impresionado. Se disponía ya a llevarlo hacia la señorita Tarrant cuando Olive Chancellor se puso de pie abruptamente y sujetó con un movimiento de la mano el brazo de la anfitriona. Le explicó que debía marcharse, no se sentía muy bien, que tenía un carruaje esperándola; deseaba también que la señorita Birdseye, si no fuera pedirle demasiado, la acompañara hasta la puerta.

—Por lo que veo también usted se ha impresionado —dijo la señorita Birdseye, observándola con ojos complacidos—. Me parece que nadie ha logrado escapar de su influjo.

Ransom se sentía decepcionado, comprendió que estaba a punto de ser sustraído del lugar. Antes de que pudiera contenerse, una exclamación salió de sus labios, la primera

que le pareció que podría impedir la retirada de su prima.

—¡Cómo!, señorita Olive, ¿no piensa usted acaso escuchar a la señora Farrinder?

Ante esas palabras la señorita Olive lo miró, mostrándole un rostro extraordinario, un rostro que difícilmente podía comprender, ni siquiera reconocer. Era un rostro imponentemente grave, con las pupilas dilatadas, una mancha roja en cada mejilla, como si le dirigiera a él una rápida y perentoria interrogación, una especie de desafío oculto que teñía toda su expresión. Él solo pudo responder a este relámpago repentino con una mirada serena, y preguntarse de nuevo qué otra broma pretendía jugarle su pariente norteña. ¿También él estaba impresionado? Suponía que así era. La señora Farrinder, que evidentemente era una mujer de mundo, acudió en su ayuda, o en la de su prima, diciendo que esperaba que Olive no permaneciera más tiempo en aquel lugar; porque advertía que sentía demasiado profundamente las cosas.

—Si se queda usted no hablaré —añadió—, acabaré por perturbarla. —Y luego añadió tiernamente, en un modo insólito para una naturaleza tan eminentemente intelectual—: Cuando las mujeres sienten de la manera que usted es capaz, ¿cómo dudar entonces de que nuestra causa triunfará?

—¡Oh! Por supuesto que triunfaremos —murmuró la señorita Birdseye.

—Pero debe usted recordar lo de Beacon Street —añadió la señora Farrinder—. Debe usted aprovechar su posición; debe hacer que despierte Back Bay.

—¡Estoy harta de Back Bay! —dijo Olive con aspereza; y se dirigió hacia la puerta con la señorita Birdseye, sin despedirse de nadie. Estaba en tal estado de agitación que no se sentía dueña de sí, y por consiguiente Ransom no pudo eximirse de acompañarla. Sin embargo al llegar a la puerta de la habitación se detuvo ante una súbita pausa efectuada por las dos damas. Olive se detuvo y se quedó allí, dudando. Miró en torno a la habitación hasta descubrir a Verena, sentada al lado de su madre en medio del grupo de entusiastas; luego, irguiendo la cabeza con aire decidido, volvió a cruzar la habitación y llegó hasta ella. Ransom pensó que quizá había llegado su oportunidad y se mantuvo al lado de su prima. El pequeño grupo de reformadores observó a la señorita Chancellor, que se acercaba; sus caras manifestaban que eran conscientes de su importancia social y al mismo tiempo manifestaban escrúpulos en reconocerla. Verena Tarrant se dio cuenta de que era el objeto de la atención de Olive y se levantó para

acercarse a la dama cuyo proceder era tan decidido. Ransom advirtió, o creyó advertir, que ella no reconocía nada; que no tenía sospechas de la importancia social de la otra. Sin embargo, sonrió radiantemente, mientras miraba tanto a la señorita Chancellor como a él; sonrió porque le agradaba sonreír, agradar, vivir su triunfo… ¿O lo hizo porque era una perfecta actricita, y esto era parte de su adiestramiento? Tomó la mano que Olive le tendía, mientras los otros contemplaban solemnemente la escena sentados en sus sillas.

—Usted no me conoce, pero yo deseo conocerla —dijo Olive—. Ahora puedo darle las gracias. ¿Vendrá usted a visitarme?

—Oh, sí, ¿dónde vive usted? —respondió Verena en el tono de una muchacha para quien una invitación (no había recibido muchas) era siempre una invitación.

La señorita Chancellor deletreó su invitación y la señora Tarrant se adelantó, sonriendo.

—Yo la conozco, señorita Chancellor. Me parece que su padre conocía a mi padre, el señor Greenstreet. Verena estará muy contenta de poder visitarla. Nosotros nos sentiremos felices de recibirla en nuestro hogar.

Mientras la madre hablaba, Basil Ransom quería aprovechar la oportunidad para decirle algo a la hija, que permanecía de pie muy cerca de él, pero no podía pensar en nada apropiado; las palabras que le venían a la mente eran sus frases de Mississippi, pero le parecieron demasiado paternales e inadecuadas. Además, no quería felicitarla por lo que había dicho; sencillamente quería decirle que era una muchacha encantadora, y era difícil marcar en ese momento la diferencia. De manera que se conformó con sonreírle en silencio, y ella sonrió a la vez… una sonrisa que le pareció dirigida solo a él.

—¿Dónde viven ustedes? —preguntó Olive; y la señora Tarrant le respondió que en Cambridge, y que el tranvía de caballos pasaba muy cerca de su casa—. ¿Vendrá pronto a mi casa? —insistió Olive, y Verena respondió que sí, que iría muy pronto, y repitió el número de Charles Street para mostrar que lo sabía de memoria.

Todo esto fue hecho con un candor infantil. Ransom supo que ella habría ido del mismo modo a visitar a quien se lo pidiese, y lamentó por un momento no ser una dama de Boston, para poder extender también una invitación semejante. Olive Chancellor

mantuvo todavía un momento entre las suyas la mano de la joven, se despidió de ella y luego dijo:

—Salgamos, señor Ransom. —Y lo hizo salir de la habitación.

A la entrada tropezaron con el señor Pardon, que subía en ese momento al piso superior con una garrafa de agua y un vaso. Allí estaba el carruaje de la señorita Chancellor, y cuando Basil la hubo ayudado a subir ella le dijo que no se molestara en acompañarla. Su hotel le quedaba muy lejos de Charles Street. Ransom tenía tan pocos deseos de sentarse a su lado, deseaba tanto fumar, que no fue sino hasta después de que el vehículo había partido cuando advirtió la frialdad de ella y reflexionó sobre los motivos por los que lo había llevado a esa reunión. Era en verdad una prima extraña, esta, su prima de Boston. Se quedó parado allí durante un momento, contemplando la luz que provenía de las ventanas de la señorita Birdseye y estuvo a punto de volver a entrar en la casa, ahora que podría hablar libremente con la muchacha. Pero se contentó con el recuerdo de su sonrisa, y se dio la vuelta con un sentimiento de alivio, después de todo, por haberse zafado de una compañía tan extravagante, así como con (en un orden muy diferente) la vulgar comprobación de hallarse muy sediento.

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Al día siguiente Verena Tarrant viajó de Cambridge a Charles Street. Aquel barrio de Boston está en comunicación directa con la zona universitaria. Pero tal vez no tan directa, debió parecerle a la pobre Verena, ya que en el congestionado tranvía que finalmente la depositó frente a la puerta de la señorita Chancellor había tenido que permanecer de pie todo el tiempo, agarrada a un asa de cuero que pendía del techo barnizado del vehículo sofocante, como una liana que colgara de un invernadero. De cualquier manera ella estaba acostumbrada a estos viajes perpendiculares, y aunque, como ya sabemos, no se inclinaba a aceptar sin discusión las condiciones sociales de su época, nunca se le hubiera ocurrido criticar el servicio urbano de su país natal. La idea de visitar inmediatamente a la señorita Chancellor había sido una ocurrencia de su madre: Verena la había escuchado muy atentamente, con los ojos bien abiertos, cuando encerrada con ella en su pequeña casa de Cambridge, mientras Selah Tarrant estaba «fuera», como ellas decían, con sus pacientes, trazó una línea de conducta para la hija. La muchacha era tan sumisa como carente de mundo, así que escuchó la enumeración que su madre le hizo de las posibles ventajas que podían provenir de la amistad con la señorita Chancellor, de la misma manera en que hubiera podido escuchar un cuento de hadas. Era también parte del cuento de hadas el hecho de que esa madre celosa le pusiera con sus propias manos el gracioso sombrero de plumas, le abotonara la chaqueta (los botones eran inmensos y brillantes) y le obsequiara veinte centavos para pagar su billete de tranvía.

Nunca se podía saber por anticipado cómo iba a reaccionar la señora Tarrant ante una cosa, y aun Verena, que filialmente era mucho menos discursiva que en sus funciones cívicas y en sus apariciones públicas, tenía la idea de que su madre era una

mujer extravagante. Y en efecto era extravagante; era una mujer flácida, blanduzca, enfermiza, nerviosa, que tenía sin embargo algunas veleidades, y una de ellas era la «alta sociedad», la posibilidad de tener una posición en esa sociedad, que un murmullo secreto le decía que nunca había tenido y una voz más audible le recordaba que estaba a punto de perder toda esperanza. Conservar esa posición, recuperarla, volver a consagrarse a ella, era la ambición que abrigaba en su corazón; esta era una de las razones por las cuales la Divina Providencia la había juzgado digna de tener una hija tan seductora. Verena había nacido no solo para liberar a su sexo de las cadenas de la esclavitud sino también para renovar una lista de visitas que se abultaba y encogía en ciertos sitios como un vestido hecho por una modista de pueblo. Como hija de Abraham Greenstreet, la señora Tarrant había pasado su juventud en los primeros círculos abolicionistas, y era consciente de que un brillante horizonte se le había oscurecido por su matrimonio con un joven que había comenzado su carrera como vendedor ambulante de lápices (había tocado en la puerta del señor Greenstreet en el ejercicio de esta función), había sido después durante cierto tiempo miembro de la célebre comunidad de Cayuga, donde no había esposas ni esposos, o algo por el estilo (la señora Tarrant no podía recordarlo), y después se había (aunque antes del descubrimiento de sus dotes curativas) distinguido en el mundo espiritualista. (Era un médium extraordinariamente dotado, solo que había tenido que abandonar esas actividades por razones en las que la versión de la señora Tarrant difería de muchas otras.) Aun en los ambientes decididos a luchar contra los prejuicios había ciertas prevenciones contra aquel individuo extremadamente versátil, que, por supuesto, no había necesitado esforzarse demasiado para obtener los favores de la señorita Greenstreet, ya que tanto los ojos de ella, como los suyos, estaban dirigidos exclusivamente hacia el futuro. La joven pareja (él era considerablemente mayor que ella) había contemplado llena de fe el porvenir hasta que descubrieron que el pasado los había abandonado por completo, y que el presente les ofrecía una seguridad bastante escuálida. La señora Tarrant, en otras palabras, se atrajo el disgusto de sus familiares, quienes le habían hecho entender a su marido que si bien ellos estaban dispuestos a romper las cadenas de los esclavos, había ciertos tipos de conducta que consideraban excesivamente inconvenientes. Estos prevalecían, según su modo de ver, en Cayuga, por lo que naturalmente pensaban que no era una buena excusa

por su parte sostener que su residencia allá había sido un (para él, pues la comunidad seguía existiendo) momentáneo episodio, ya que solo en los días de campo espirituales y las excursiones vegetarianas era en lo que la pareja mal vista buscaba consolación.

Tal era la estrechez de puntos de vista de personas que hasta ese momento uno suponía con capacidad para abrir sus corazones a todas las novedades reformadoras, y que de pronto se veían enfrentados a una prueba auténtica, según consideraba la señora Tarrant. Los gustos de su marido habían penetrado fácilmente en su suave y permeable superficie moral, y la pareja vivía en una atmósfera de novedades en las cuales, ocasionalmente, la esposa complaciente experimentaba la refrescante sensación del ayuno. Su padre murió dejando, después de todo, muy poco dinero; su modesta fortuna había sido invertida en los negros. Selah Tarrant y su compañera vivieron extrañas aventuras. Durante algún tiempo ella se encontró completamente enrolada en el gran ejército irregular de vendedores de panaceas, domiciliada en una Bohemia humanitarista. Aquello la había absorbido como un pantano social; se había ido hundiendo en él cada día más, sin medir las pulgadas de su descenso. Para las fechas en que esta historia tuvo lugar, se hallaba sumergida hasta el cuello; se habría podido decir muy bien que había tocado fondo. Cuando fue invitada por la señorita Birdseye le pareció haber vuelto a ser admitida en sociedad. La puerta que se le había abierto no era la puerta que admitía a otros (nunca olvidaría la nariz respingona de la señora Farrinder), y el portón superior permanecía cerrado, aunque le hacía entrever posibles panoramas. Había vivido con hombres de largas cabelleras y mujeres de cabellos cortos; se había adherido con un entusiasmo maleable y una irremediable carencia de fondos a una docena de experimentos sociales, se había beneficiado de los consuelos de un centenar de religiones, había seguido innumerables regímenes dietéticos, principalmente de orden negativo, y había asistido a una sesión, a una *séance* o a una conferencia con la misma regularidad con que había comido su cena. Su marido tenía siempre billetes para las conferencias: en los momentos de irritación por no poder cubrir alguna necesidad, le había reprochado que era lo único con que contaban. El recuerdo de todas las noches de invierno caminando a través del fango (¡los billetes, por desgracia, no eran billetes para el tranvía!) para oír a la señora Ada T. P. Foat discurrir sobre las «tierras de verano» volvía a ella para llenarla de amargura. Selah

había sido en una época un gran entusiasta de la señora Foat, y en opinión de su esposa había estado «asociado» con ella (tal era el término que el propio Selah usaba para referirse a tales episodios) en Cayuga. La pobre mujer tenía que soportar en su vida conyugal demasiadas cosas; había momentos en que le era necesario echar mano de toda su fe en el genio de su marido para poder sostenerse. Sabía que él tenía grandes dotes magnéticas (ese, en efecto, era su genio) y sentía que aquel magnetismo era lo que aún la mantenía ligada a él. Había aceptado pasivamente cosas sobre las que realmente no sabía qué pensar; había momentos en que sospechaba que había perdido el fuerte sentido moral de que los Greenstreet se habían sentido siempre orgullosos.

Era evidente que una mujer que había tenido el mal gusto de casarse con Selah Tarrant no podía poseer bajo ninguna circunstancia un juicio sólido; pero no cabía duda de que la pobre dama se había vuelto terriblemente pasiva. Había fingido no comprender muchas cosas, había cedido, había aceptado compromisos inaceptables; se preguntaba si, después de todo, había hecho algo malo cuando trataba solamente de ayudar a su marido, en aquellos días excitantes de actividad mediúmnica, cuando algunas veces la mesa se negaba a levantarse del suelo, el sofá no volaba por los aires y la suave mano de algún difunto querido no se mostraba tan complaciente como hubiera sido de desear para visitar el círculo. La mano de la señora Tarrant era lo suficientemente ligera para realizar los efectos más sobrenaturales, y en tales casos tranquilizaba su conciencia haciéndose la reflexión de que contribuía a proteger la fe en la inmortalidad. De cualquier manera, por amor a Verena, se sintió feliz de salir finalmente de esa fase de comunicación con los espíritus; sus ambiciones con respecto a su hija tomaron una forma ajena al deseo de que ella también participara en la propagación de la fe en la inmortalidad. Sin embargo, entre los múltiples recuerdos de la señora Tarrant, aquellos relacionados con el cuarto oscuro, el círculo de personas en actitud de espera, los pequeños golpes sobre la mesita y la pared, los suaves roces en la mejilla y en los pies, la música en el aire, la lluvia de flores, el sentimiento de algo misterioso en torno a la persona, eran los que más amorosamente acariciaba. Detestaba a su marido por haberla magnetizado hasta el punto de aceptar ciertas cosas y aun hacerlas, y ante aquel pensamiento su rostro volvía a enrojecer violentamente; lo odiaba por la manera en que, de alguna manera, la había hecho descender en la escala

social, y al mismo tiempo lo admiraba por su absoluta desvergüenza que había terminado por imponerse aun a ella (a pesar de las mortificaciones, los escándalos y el fracaso de una existencia miserable) como una aureola de infalibilidad. Se daba perfectamente cuenta de que era un redomado charlatán, y sin embargo ese conocimiento tenía esta imperfección, que él nunca lo había admitido… un hecho realmente importante cuando se piensa en las múltiples oportunidades que había tenido para hacerlo. Nunca había admitido apartarse de una línea recta de conducta. Se habían encontrado tantas veces juntos como dos augures detrás de un altar, sin que jamás él le hubiera dirigido una mirada que la concurrencia no pudiera observar. Aun en la intimidad de la vida familiar él usaba expresiones, o aducía excusas, explicaciones, maneras de presentar las cosas que, así al menos lo sentía, eran demasiado sublimes para ella. Estaban comprometidos, como la naturaleza de Selah estaba comprometida, con las vicisitudes de una vida pública.

Así había acabado por ocurrir, que en su conciencia elástica y desmoralizada, entre todas las cosas que despreciaba en su vida y todas las que le agradaban, entre sus sufrimientos por la incapacidad del marido para ganarse la vida y una especie de terror ante su firmeza (él tenía la idea de que vivían deliciosamente), así ocurría, repito, que el cínico cargo definido que ella podía hacerle en el presente era que no tuviese dotes de orador. Allí le apretaba el zapato… allí se manifestaba la debilidad de Selah. Era incapaz de mantener la atención de un público, no tenía condiciones de conferenciante. Estaba lleno de ideas, pero no sabía exponerlas. La oratoria constituía una tradición en casa de los Greenstreet, y si alguien le hubiera preguntado a la señora Tarrant si en sus años juveniles había supuesto que terminaría casándose con un curandero mesmeriano, habría respondido: «Bueno, ¡jamás me imaginé que iba a casarme con un caballero incapaz de hablar en una plataforma!». Para ella esta era la mayor humillación de que había sido víctima; incluía y superaba todas las otras, y era una pobre consolación el que Selah poseyera como un sustituto —su carrera como curandero, por no hablar de las otras, era la prueba— la elocuencia de la mano. Los Greenstreet jamás le habían dado demasiada importancia a las virtudes manuales, pero creían en la influencia de los labios. Así pues, es posible imaginar la exaltación con que tiempo después la señora Tarrant descubrió ser la madre de una doncella inspirada, una joven de cuyos labios la

elocuencia se desbordaba a raudales. La tradición de los Greenstreet no perecería, y los parajes áridos de la vida de la señora Tarrant tal vez serían copiosamente regados. Hay que advertir que en los últimos tiempos aquellas superficies áridas habían sido también moderadamente irrigadas por otra fuente. Desde que Selah se había entregado a los misterios mesmerianos, su hogar se había vuelto más adecuado a lo que debía ser el hogar de una Greenstreet. Su marido tenía «un número considerable» de pacientes, recibía unos dos dólares por cada visita, y había realizado algunas curas gratificantes. Una dama en Cambridge le había quedado tan agradecida que lo había persuadido a que tomara una casa cerca de ella, a fin de que el doctor Tarrant pudiera visitarla en cualquier momento que fuera necesario. Él aceptó inmediatamente esta sugerencia —habían tenido tantas casas que una más o menos no importaba— y la señora Tarrant comenzó a sentir que realmente habían «tocado» algo.

Aun a Verena, como ya sabemos, le resultaba confusa y confundidora: la muchacha aún no había comprendido del todo los principios por los cuales su madre pasaba a veces de su habitual despreocupación moral a una repentina severidad de maneras. Este fenómeno había ocurrido tan pronto como los vapores de la ambición social comenzaban a subir a su cerebro. Entonces sacaba un brazo de su remendada bata de casa para tratar de aferrarse a la ocasión propicia. En esas ocasiones su hija quedaba desconcertada por su volubilidad, por exhortarla, como si fuera un deber, a hacer nuevas amistades, y por su aparente riqueza de conocimientos de los misterios de la buena sociedad. Tenía, en particular, una manera de explicarle confidencialmente —y en su intento de ser más explícita hacía las muecas más extrañas— qué interpretación se debía dar a veces a las maneras de las personas de alto rango, y la delicada dignidad con que debían ser recibidas, que hacía que Verena se preguntara, sorprendida, qué secretas fuentes de información podía tener. Verena veía la vida con gran sencillez: no estaba al corriente de las muchas diferencias de categoría social… Sabía que había gente rica y gente pobre, y que la casa de su padre nunca había sido visitada por tal opulencia para que uno tuviera que preguntarse si en un mundo de desheredados era lícito entregarse al lujo. Pero excepto cuando su madre la hacía sentir incómoda por el resentimiento de algún desaire que ella no había percibido, o cuando mostraba su aflicción por una buena ocasión desvanecida (mientras la señora Tarrant buscaba algo

que «ponerse encima»), Verena no tenía la impresión de no ser tan buena como cualquier otra persona, pues ninguna autoridad respetable había fijado el sitio de los curanderos mesmerianos en las esferas elegantes. Era imposible saber con anticipación cómo se tomaría las cosas la señora Tarrant. Algunas veces era humilde hasta la abyección; otras, tan susceptible que parecía que todo el mundo que la observaba deseaba insultarla. En ciertos momentos sospechaba de las damas (eran sobre todo damas) a quienes Selah mesmerizaba, después parecía nuevamente renunciar a todo salvo a sus pantuflas y al periódico vespertino (de esta publicación ella obtenía un placer indescriptible), así que si la señora Foat en persona hubiese regresado de las tierras del sol (a las que había emigrado hacía tiempo) no habría perturbado la indiferencia casi cínica de la señora Tarrant.

Era, sin embargo, en las sutilezas sociales en lo que deseaba adiestrar a su hija, y cuando esta descubría el deseo que algunas personas tenían de conocerla era cuando la joven advertía todo lo que aún tenía que aprender. Todo lo que deseaba en la vida era aprender, y debe añadirse que consideraba a su madre, con toda buena fe, como una eximia maestra. Algunas veces se quedaba perpleja ante todos los conocimientos mundanos que aquella parecía poseer, los que, de alguna manera, no formaban parte de los ideales de una vida superior, que todos, en una casa como la de ellos, debían cultivar por encima de cualquier otra cosa; y no estaba comprendido en el reino de la justicia que todos trataban de instaurar dar tal importancia a detalles tan insignificantes. Verena consideraba que su padre se movía con mayor coherencia en esas esferas superiores, aunque su indiferencia a los valores tradicionales y su constante espera de días más luminosos no la habían llevado aún a reflexionar sobre la posibilidad de que los hombres fueran más desinteresados que las mujeres. ¿Era interés lo que había inducido a su madre a responder tan cordialmente a la invitación de la señorita Chancellor, y decirle a Verena, con el aire de quien lo sabe todo, que la primera cosa que tenía que hacer era ir a buscarla *inmediatamente*? Ninguna cursiva podrá dar idea de la sinceridad del énfasis de la señora Tarrant. ¿Por qué no había dicho, como en ocasiones anteriores, que si la gente deseaba verlos que fuera a visitarlos a su casa? ¿Es que habían caído tan bajo que no sabían que existía una etiqueta para el intercambio de tarjetas de visita? Cuando la señora Tarrant tocaba el tema de la

etiqueta podía extenderse demasiado: sin embargo en esta ocasión fue más bien breve; le convenía más sostener que la señorita Chancellor había sido muy amable con ellos, que era una amiga conveniente, que se había emocionado más que nadie por el bello discurso de Verena; que le abriría las puertas de los mejores salones de Boston; que al decir «Venga pronto» había querido decir que lo hiciera al día siguiente, que así debían tomarlo (uno debía saber cuándo dar un paso adelante con elegancia); y, en fin, que ella, la señora Tarrant, sabía perfectamente de lo que estaba hablando.

Verena aceptó todo esto, ya que era lo suficientemente joven como para disfrutar cualquier viaje en tranvía, y todo en el mundo le producía curiosidad; lo único que le extrañaba un poco es que su madre supiera tantas cosas sobre la señorita Chancellor después de verla en una sola ocasión. Lo que Verena había notado, sobre todo, en la joven dama que se le había acercado la noche anterior era que vestía muy fúnebremente, que parecía que hubiese estado llorando (Verena podía reconocer esa expresión, pues la había visto muchas veces) y que parecía tener mucha prisa por marcharse. De cualquier modo, si era tan interesante como su madre decía lo podría saber muy pronto. Mientras tanto, no había nada en la opinión que la muchacha tenía de sí y de su propia importancia que la hiciera temer correr el riesgo de cometer un error. No tenía ninguna idea de sí misma; lo único en que se interesaba era en cosas exteriores a ella. Ni siquiera la manifestación de su «don» la había hecho considerarse demasiado preciosa para los experimentos en los que participaba; no tenía ni un ápice de inseguridad, pero tampoco de vanidad. Aunque parezca del todo natural que una hija de Selah Tarrant y de su mujer fuera una oradora inspirada, sin embargo, al conocer mejor a Verena, resultaba casi inconcebible que fuera producto de semejante pareja. Sus ideas sobre el placer eran muy sencillas; disfrutó poniéndose su nuevo sombrero, con su abundancia de plumas, y los veinte centavos que llevaba en la mano le parecieron una gran suma.

XI

—Tenía la seguridad de que vendría; he tenido el presentimiento todo el día; algo me lo decía.

Tales fueron las palabras con que Olive Chancellor acogió a su joven visitante, dirigiéndose a ella rápidamente desde la ventana donde podía haber estado esperando su llegada. Algunas semanas más tarde le dijo a Verena cuán definido había sido ese presentimiento, y cómo le había hecho pasar el día en una agitación nerviosa tan violenta como dolorosa. Le dijo que aquellos presentimientos formaban parte de su carácter, que no sabía cómo dominarlos; mencionó, como otro ejemplo, el repentino temor que la había asaltado la noche anterior en el carruaje después de haber propuesto al señor Ransom que la acompañara a casa de la señorita Birdseye. Había sido algo tan extraño como instintivo, y aquella extrañeza debió, por supuesto, haber sorprendido al señor Ransom, porque había sido ella quien le había propuesto acompañarla y de pronto había cambiado de parecer. No había podido remediarlo; su corazón había comenzado a latir con la convicción de que si él cruzaba aquel umbral ella recibiría un daño. No había podido disuadirlo, y ahora ya no le importaba, pues ahora había ganado la simpatía de Verena y esto la volvía indiferente a cualquier riesgo, a cualquier otro placer. Para esas fechas ya Verena sabía cuán especial era su amiga, cuán nerviosa y seria era, cuán personal y exclusiva, qué fuerza de voluntad tenía, qué concentración y firmeza de propósitos. Olive la había raptado en el sentido literal de la expresión, como un pájaro en el aire, y la había transportado bajo sus alas poderosas a través del vertiginoso vacío del espacio. Y a Verena todo aquello le gustaba, le gustaba ser elevada hasta las alturas sin tener que desplegar ningún esfuerzo y contemplar a sus pies la creación, y toda la historia humana, desde tales alturas. Desde aquella primera

entrevista sintió que había sido conquistada y se abandonó a este sentimiento con los ojos cerrados, como lo hacemos cuando una persona en quien tenemos plena confianza nos propone, con nuestro consentimiento, hacernos conocer una nueva sensación.

—Quiero conocerla —le dijo Olive en aquella ocasión—. Anoche, apenas comenzó usted a hablar cuando sentí que debía conocerla. Me pareció usted extraordinaria. No sé cómo debo comportarme ante usted. Pero creo que deberíamos ser amigas, por eso le pedí abiertamente, sin preliminares, que viniera, y estaba segura de que usted vendría. Es perfecto que haya venido usted, y me viene a probar que yo tenía razón.

Estos comentarios salieron de los labios de la señorita Chancellor precipitadamente, y apenas podía contener la respiración, con un temblor que aparecía siempre en su voz, aunque no estuviera del todo excitada, mientras hacía que Verena se sentara a su lado en el sofá, examinándola de arriba abajo de manera que la muchacha se felicitó por haberse puesto la chaqueta con botones dorados. Este escrutinio fue apenas el principio; fue con este rápido examen que no dejó nada sin observar con el que Olive tomó posesión de ella.

—Usted es notable; ¡no sé si sabe cuán excepcional es! —continuó, murmurando las palabras como si las dijera solo para sí, inconsciente de nada que no fuera su admiración.

Verena se sentó y sonrió, sin mostrar el más mínimo sonrojo, con su mirada pura y luminosa, que, en su caso, volvía superflua cualquier respuesta.

—Oh, no soy yo, sabe usted; es algo que recibo del exterior.

Dijo esto con voz ligera, como si tuviera costumbre de repetirlo, y Olive se preguntó si se trataría de una demostración de modestia sincera o si estaría repitiendo una frase hecha. La pregunta no implicaba una crítica, pues hubiera estado igualmente satisfecha si la muchacha no fuera sino un manojo de lugares comunes, y no por eso la hubiera admirado menos. Le gustaba precisamente tal como era, era tan extraña, tan distinta de las otras muchachas que por lo regular conocía: parecía pertenecer a una tribu de gitanos, a una Bohemia trascendental. Con sus vestidos brillantes y vulgares y su aspecto vistoso, hubiera podido ser una trapecista o una adivina; y todo esto tenía para Olive el inmenso mérito de ponerla en el nivel del «pueblo», de detenerla en el seno de aquella misteriosa y oscura democracia de la que la señorita Chancellor estaba

convencida de que las clases superiores nada conocían y con la que (posiblemente en un futuro muy próximo) tendrían que contar. Además de todo, aquella jovencita la había conmovido como nunca antes la había conmovido nadie, y el poder para lograr eso, fuese cual fuera la fuente de la que provenía, era algo que merecía admiración. Todavía en ese momento su emoción era muy viva, aunque conversara con su huésped como si todo se hubiese desarrollado de la manera más natural, y lo que le impedía calmarse totalmente era el hecho de darse cuenta de que finalmente encontraba lo que desde hacía tanto tiempo buscaba: una amiga del propio sexo, con quien poder establecer una comunión de almas. Era necesario un doble consentimiento para entablar una amistad; pero no era posible que una muchacha tan exquisitamente sensible se negara. Olive tenía la penetración para descubrir en un momento que se trataba de una criatura de ilimitada generosidad. No sé cuál haya sido el fundamento real de las otras premoniciones de la señorita Chancellor, pero era evidente que en el presente caso había sabido medir a la perfección las virtudes de Verena. Esto era lo que ella quería; después de eso, el resto no importaba. La señorita Tarrant podía llevar botones dorados de la cabeza a los pies, pero su espíritu no podía ser vulgar.

—Mi madre me dijo que lo mejor sería venir inmediatamente —dijo Verena contemplando el salón, muy contenta de hallarse en un lugar tan agradable y advirtiendo muchas cosas que le hubiera gustado examinar con mayor detenimiento.

—Su madre se dio cuenta de que yo hablaba en serio; no todo el mundo me hace el honor de comprenderlo. Debe de haber advertido que estaba conmovida de la cabeza a los pies. Solo pude decir dos palabras… no me era posible hablar más. ¡Qué poder… qué poder, señorita Tarrant!

—Sí, me imagino que debe de ser un poder. Si no lo fuera yo no lograría desenvolverme.

—Es usted tan sencilla… tan semejante a una niña —dijo Olive Chancellor. Era la verdad, y quiso decírsela porque, rápidamente, sin formalidades ni circunloquios, se había establecido una intimidad entre ellas. Ella había deseado que aquello ocurriera, y era tal su impaciencia que no había estado la joven más de cinco minutos en el salón cuando ya estaba tratando el asunto que más le interesaba, interrumpiéndose a cada minuto—: ¿Querrá usted ser mi amiga? ¿La más íntima de mis amigas? ¿Por encima de

cualquier otra persona?, ¿de cualquier otra cosa? ¿Una amiga para toda la vida? —Su rostro expresaba ansiedad y ternura.

Verena soltó una alegre carcajada, sin mostrar ni sombra de embarazo o confusión.

—Tal vez le guste yo demasiado —dijo.

—Por supuesto que me gusta mucho. Cuando a mí me gusta algo, me gusta demasiado. Pero desde luego otra cosa es que yo le guste —añadió Olive Chancellor —. Debemos esperar… debemos esperar. Cuando algo me interesa puedo tener paciencia. —Le tendió una mano a Verena, y el movimiento fue a la vez tan suplicante y espontáneo que la muchacha la tomó instintivamente entre las suyas. Así, tomadas de las manos, las dos jóvenes permanecieron por algunos momentos contemplándose una a otra—. Hay muchas cosas que me gustaría preguntarle.

—Bueno, yo no puedo decir muchas cosas salvo cuando estoy bajo la influencia de mi padre —respondió Verena con un candor ante el cual la misma humildad hubiera resultado pretenciosa.

—No es su padre quien me interesa —respondió con gravedad Olive Chancellor, con un aire de seguridad.

—Es muy bueno —dijo sencillamente Verena—. Y tiene poderes magnéticos maravillosos.

—No se trata de su padre ni tampoco de su madre. No pienso en ellos ni los necesito. Solo a usted, tal como es.

Verena bajó la mirada hacia su regazo. Una actitud que en verdad le sentaba muy bien.

—¿Desea usted que yo renuncie…? —preguntó sonriendo.

Olive Chancellor retuvo el aliento por un instante, como una criatura dolorida: luego, con su voz temblorosa, matizada por una vibración de angustia, dijo:

—¡Oh! ¿Cómo podría yo pedirle que renuncie a algo? Soy yo quien renunciaré… renunciaré a todo.

Todavía impresionada por el agradable salón de su anfitriona, y por lo que su madre le había dicho sobre la riqueza de la señorita Chancellor, y su posición en la alta sociedad de Boston, Verena, con el fresco y vivo interés que habían despertado en ella los objetos que las rodeaban, se preguntaba qué querría decir la otra con su proyecto de

renunciación. Esperaba que no lo hiciera, al menos hasta que ella, Verena, hubiera tenido oportunidad de verlo todo. Comprendió sin embargo que, al menos por el momento, no podía obtener otra respuesta que no fuera la intensidad de emoción de la señorita Chancellor, que la hizo exclamar de pronto, como en un éxtasis nervioso de anticipación:

—Pero es necesario esperar. ¿Por qué hablar ahora de eso? Debemos esperar. Todo va a resultar bien —añadió ya más calmada y con mucha dulzura.

Verena se preguntaría después cómo era posible que no se hubiese atemorizado en aquel momento. Cómo era posible que no se hubiese levantado, le hubiera dado la espalda y se hubiera salvado escapándose de allí. Pero no formaba parte de su naturaleza ni el ser temerosa ni cauta; no sabía aún lo que era el miedo. Conocía muy poco el mundo para desconfiar de los entusiasmos repentinos, y si hubiese tenido alguna sospecha esta habría sido (de acuerdo con el sentido común) la equivocada… habría sospechado que aquel extraño fuego se extinguiría por sí mismo. Carecía de esa sospecha porque en el rostro exaltado de la señorita Chancellor había una luz que parecía decir que un sentimiento, para ella, primero consumiría su objeto, a la misma señorita Chancellor, antes de extinguirse. Verena no tenía ninguna impresión desagradable; solo se sentía agradablemente protegida. También ella había soñado con tener una amistad, aunque no fuera eso lo que más le interesara, y llegó a pensar que esta era la amistad que la fortuna le tenía reservada. Ella jamás retrocedía.

—¿Vive usted aquí completamente sola? —le preguntó a Olive.

—No sería así si usted accediera a venir a vivir conmigo.

Ni siquiera una respuesta tan apasionada intranquilizó a Verena; pensó que era posible que entre la gente opulenta se hicieran esas proposiciones con tanta naturalidad. Era parte de la elegancia, del lujo, de la riqueza; correspondía a un mundo de invitaciones en el que ella hasta entonces no había participado. Pero le pareció casi una mofa al pensar en la pequeña casita de Cambridge, donde hasta las tablas de las escaleras del porche estaban sueltas.

—Debo quedarme con mis padres —dijo—. Y además tengo mi trabajo, sabe usted. Debo vivir para eso.

—¿Su trabajo? —repitió Olive, sin entender del todo.

—Mi don —dijo Verena, sonriente.

—Oh, sí, debe usted usarlo. No lo he olvidado; debe usted conmover al mundo con él; es realmente divino.

Y realmente era tan sincera en lo que decía que había permanecido despierta toda la noche pensando en eso, y la esencia de aquellos pensamientos era que si tan solo pudiera rescatar a la muchacha de los peligros de una explotación vulgar, si le permitiera constituirse en su protectora y su amiga devota, las dos, juntas, lograrían resultados inauditos. El genio de Verena era un misterio, y seguiría siendo un misterio. Era imposible saber cómo esa encantadora, floreciente y sencilla criatura, toda juventud y gracia e inocencia, había obtenido aquellos extraordinarios poderes intelectuales. Cuando no hacía uso de su don parecía todo menos intelectual, y viéndola como ahora, por ejemplo, permanecer sentada allí, nunca hubiera nadie imaginado todo lo que podía revelar. Olive debía contentarse, por el momento, con admitir que aquel don lo había recibido, igual que su belleza y su distinción (porque también Olive le encontraba esta virtud), directamente del cielo, sin que tuvieran nada que ver sus padres, quienes decididamente disgustaban a la señorita Chancellor. Aun entre los reformadores ella establecía diferencias; pensaba que todas las personas sabias ansiaban grandes reformas, pero que no todos los patrocinadores de esas reformas eran necesariamente sabios. Permaneció un momento en silencio, después de su última afirmación, y entonces volvió a repetir, como si fuera la solución de todo, como si sus palabras representaran con absoluta certidumbre una inmensa felicidad futura:

—¡Debemos esperar, debemos esperar!

Verena estaba perfectamente dispuesta a esperar, aunque no sabía con exactitud qué debían esperar, y la franqueza de su consentimiento se reflejó en el rostro y pareció vibrar en sus mutuas miradas. Olive le hizo innumerables preguntas; quería penetrar en su vida. Fue una de esas conversaciones que se recuerdan más tarde, en las que cada palabra tiene referencia a algo que estaba por iniciarse o por tener una continuación. Mientras más sabía Olive de la vida de su amiga más quería penetrar en ella y más se asombraba. Sabía que en Estados Unidos se producían vidas tan extrañas como aquella. Pero esta era mucho más extraña de todo lo que podía haberse imaginado, y lo más extraño de todo era que la joven no considerase extraño nada de aquello. Había crecido

en cuartos oscuros, había sido amamantada en medio de manifestaciones; había comenzado a escuchar conferencias desde muy niña, porque su madre no tenía con quién dejarla en casa. Había estado sentada en las rodillas de sonámbulos, y las médiums se la habían pasado de mano en mano; estaba familiarizada con toda clase de «curas» y se había educado entre señoras que editaban periódicos que defendían nuevas sectas religiosas, y entre personas que despreciaban el vínculo matrimonial. Verena hablaba del vínculo matrimonial como podía haberlo hecho de una última novela, tan frecuentes eran las discusiones que había oído sobre él. A veces, al escuchar sus respuestas, Olive Chancellor cerraba los ojos como en espera de que el vértigo pasara. Las revelaciones de su joven amiga le producían realmente el efecto del vértigo; le advertían sobre todos los peligros de que debía salvarla. Verena estaba absolutamente incontaminada, y nunca la maldad lograría mancillarla; pero aunque Olive no tenía ideas formadas sobre el vínculo matrimonial fuera de que en sí ya era detestable (las reformas a ese respecto no le interesaban) no aprobaba la «atmósfera» de los círculos en que esas instituciones se discutían. Tampoco en esa ocasión tenía ningún deseo de examinar ese asunto; de cualquier manera, para asegurarse, le preguntaría a Verena si desaprobaba la institución del matrimonio.

—Bueno, más bien diría —respondió Verena— que prefiero la unión libre.

Olive perdió la respiración por un momento; tal idea le resultó en extremo desagradable. Por toda respuesta solo pudo murmurar vagamente:

—¡Desearía que me permita ayudarla!

Pero al parecer Verena no tenía ninguna necesidad de ayuda, pues cada vez resultaba más y más claro que su elocuencia, cuando se levantaba a hablar ante un puñado de personas, era simple y sencillamente inspiración. Respondió con cortesía a todas las preguntas que le dirigió su amiga sin preocuparse de ser comprendida. Hablaba para responder a una atención, no para agradar; pero, después de todo, no lograba contar demasiado de su intimidad. Eso resultó evidente cuando Olive le preguntó dónde había adquirido aquel «conocimiento intenso» de los sufrimientos de la mujer; ya que en el discurso pronunciado en casa de la señorita Birdseye mostraba que también ella (como la misma Olive) había tenido visiones nocturnas durante las horas de insomnio. Verena se quedó pensativa un momento, tratando de comprender a qué se refería su amiga, y

luego, siempre con una sonrisa, le preguntó a su vez cómo Juana de Arco había tenido noción de los sufrimientos de Francia. Aquellas palabras fueron pronunciadas con tal expresión que Olive apenas pudo contener el deseo de besarla; en aquel momento le parecía realmente que la muchacha era una nueva Juana de Arco que recibía visitas de los santos. Olive, por supuesto, recordaría más tarde que su pregunta no había sido respondida con precisión; y también reflexionaría en algo que hacía más difícil obtener una respuesta precisa, y era el hecho de que la joven se había educado entre doctoras, médiums, oradoras, curanderas, mujeres todas que, por haber sido capaces de escapar de una vida pasiva, podían ilustrar solo muy parcialmente la miserable situación de su sexo en general. Era verdad también que podían haberlo mostrado en sus conversaciones, al narrar todo aquello «por lo que habían pasado» y hacérselo saber a sus hermanas más jóvenes; pero Olive estaba segura de que el instinto profético de Verena de ninguna manera había surgido de las charlas de esas mujeres (la señorita Chancellor conocía esas voces perfectamente), sino más bien de su silencio. Le dijo a su amiga que fueran o no los ángeles caídos del cielo en su brillante armadura, consideraba que ella era la única persona que hasta la fecha había conocido que sintiera la misma ternura y la misma piedad por las mujeres que sentía ella. La señorita Birdseye tenía algo de eso, pero la señorita Birdseye deseaba pasión, ardor, y estaba dispuesta a hacer las concesiones más humillantes. La señora Farrinder no era una mujer débil, desde luego, y había contribuido a la causa con su gran inteligencia, pero no era lo bastante personal… era demasiado abstracta. Verena no era abstracta; parecía haber recorrido con la imaginación todas las épocas. Verena respondió que consideraba tener cierta imaginación, sin la cual no podría lograr ser tan persuasiva en una tribuna. En ese momento Olive, tomándole de nuevo una mano, le dijo que deseaba que le asegurase que lo único que le importaba en el mundo era la redención de la mujer. Que le asegurara que con la ayuda de la Providencia consagraría su vida a esa causa. Verena se ruborizó un poco ante esa exigencia y un relámpago en sus ojos profundos demostró por primera vez en esa ocasión su capacidad de exaltación.

—¡Oh, sí! ¡Quiero ofrendar mi vida! —exclamó con voz vibrante; y luego añadió con solemnidad—: ¡Quiero hacer algo grandioso!

—¡Lo conseguirá, lo conseguirá! ¡Ambas lo lograremos! —gritó Olive Chancellor en un rapto de entusiasmo. Pero después de una pausa, continuó—: Me pregunto si sabe usted, joven y bella como es, lo que significa… ofrendar la vida.

Verena bajó la mirada, meditabunda.

—Bueno —respondió—, creo haber reflexionado mucho más de lo que parece.

—¿Lee usted alemán? ¿Conoce usted el *Fausto*? —dijo Olive—. *Entsagen sollst du, sollst entsagen!*

—No comprendo el alemán. Me gustaría estudiarlo. Me gustaría saberlo todo.

—Trabajaremos juntas; lo estudiaremos todo —dijo Olive casi entre gemidos; y mientras hablaba se abría ante su mirada un cuadro armonioso de noches tranquilas de invierno pasadas bajo la lámpara, mientras fuera caía la nieve, el té sobre una mesita, en compañía de una amiga íntima con quien poder conversar sobre Goethe, tal vez el único autor extranjero que le interesaba; porque detestaba las obras francesas a pesar de la importancia que en ellas se concedía a la mujer. Esas beatíficas visiones eran el mayor lujo que se concedía, pero no era frecuente que se entregara a ellas. Parecía que Verena las vislumbraba también, porque con el rostro aún más encendido exclamó que aquello le gustaría muchísimo. A la vez preguntó qué significaban aquellas palabras alemanas.

—¡Deberás renunciar, contenerte, abstenerte! Por lo menos así las ha traducido Bayard Taylor —respondió Olive.

—Está bien; me imagino que podré abstenerme —exclamó Verena, riendo. Y se levantó rápidamente, como si con su retirada pudiera dar una prueba de lo que quería decir.

Olive tendió los brazos para detenerla, y en ese momento una de las *portières* de la sala fue corrida y una camarera de la señorita Chancellor introdujo a un caballero.

XII

Verena lo reconoció; lo había visto la noche anterior en casa de la señorita Birdseye, y le dijo a la dueña de casa:

—Ahora me retiro. Tiene usted otras visitas.

Verena pensaba que en el gran mundo (como la señora Farrinder, también ella pensaba que la señorita Chancellor pertenecía a él… y que por permanecer en esa casa ella misma estaba dentro de él), en las más altas esferas sociales, era costumbre que un visitante partiera cuando llegaba otro. En la puerta de algunas casas le habían dicho que no podía ser recibida porque la señora de la casa tenía visitas, y en esas ocasiones se retiraba con un sentimiento de aprensión más que de ofensa. No se trataba de las puertas del gran mundo, pero en ese sentido ella pensaba que trataban de emular esos bastiones. Olive Chancellor dirigió a Basil Ransom un saludo que creyó una muestra de consumada elegancia, pero que el joven, al describirle algunos meses después la escena a la señora Luna, cuya susceptibilidad no se sentía obligado a considerar (ya que ella consideraba tan poco la suya), definió como una actitud gélida. Olive había pensado que era muy posible que su primo se presentara ese día, antes de salir de Boston; aunque era perfectamente consciente de no haberlo alentado a dar ese paso en el momento en que se separaron. Si no se hubiera presentado se habría sentido contrariada, y en el caso de que lo hiciera le produciría un acceso de furia; tenía la suficiente claridad para advertirlo. De cualquier modo tenía el presentimiento de que de las dos posibles molestias, la fortuna le reservaría la menor; el único agravio que podía aducir contra él era que hubiese respondido a su carta; un agravio carente de todo fundamento. En el caso de que se presentara lo haría con toda probabilidad antes de la cena, a la misma hora del día anterior. Pero el joven se había anticipado

considerablemente a esa hora, y la señorita Chancellor consideró que se había aprovechado deslealmente de ella, sorprendiéndola en su intimidad. Se sentía ofendida, desconcertada, pero como ya he dicho, se comportó como una dama. Estaba decidida a no volver a ser extravagante como había sido al invitarlo a casa de la señorita Birdseye. Aquel extraño temor que la había acometido en aquella ocasión era algo, por lo menos así lo esperaba, que no volvería a repetirse. No sabía qué daño podría causarle él; no había podido impedir, pese a estar presente, uno de los acontecimientos más felices que le habían sucedido a Olive: esta rápida y satisfactoria visita de Verena. Ransom había llegado solo al final, y ahora Verena debía retirarse. La mano de Olive alentó inmediatamente esa despedida.

Es de temerse que Ransom no haya podido ocultar su satisfacción al encontrarse una vez más frente a esta encantadora criatura con la que había cambiado la noche anterior algunas sonrisas sin palabras. Le producía más placer encontrarla que si hubiese sido una antigua amiga, y le parecía que súbitamente se hubiera convertido en una nueva. «La encantadora muchacha —se dijo para sus adentros— me sonríe como para darme a entender que le agrado.» No podía comprender que era una fatuidad de su parte, que la muchacha le sonreía así a todo el mundo. Es más, ella, en su honor, no volvió a sentarse sino que le hizo entender que estaba por marcharse. Los tres permanecieron de pie en medio de aquella sala peculiarmente larga, y, por primera vez en su vida, Olive Chancellor decidió no presentar a dos personas que se encontraban bajo su techo. Detestaba Europa, pero podía ser europea cuando era preciso. Ninguno de sus huéspedes podía sospechar que, al dejarlos allí plantados, uno frente al otro (cosa en verdad terrible para un corazón americano), Olive tenía una justificación de ese tipo; y en realidad Basil Ransom sintió que no le importaba que lo presentaran o no, y que para remediar un mal de aquel calibre era necesario responder con un mal de igual magnitud.

—La señorita Tarrant no se sorprenderá si la reconozco… y si me tomo la libertad de dirigirle la palabra. Ella es un personaje público y debe pagar las penas de su celebridad. —Le dirigió audazmente estas palabras a la joven, con sus más galantes maneras de hombre del Sur, diciéndose que a la luz del día era todavía más hermosa.

—¡Oh!, muchos caballeros han hablado conmigo —dijo Verena—. Conocí a bastantes en Topeka… —Y la frase se interrumpió en sus labios al observar a Olive, como si se preguntara qué le sucedía a su amiga.

—Me temo que se retira usted precisamente en el momento en que llego yo —continuó Ransom—. ¿Se da usted cuenta de lo cruel que para mí resulta esto? Ya sé cuáles son sus ideas… las expresó usted anoche en un lenguaje muy bello; por supuesto llegó a convencerme. Me avergüenzo de ser hombre; pero lo soy, y no puedo remediarlo, estoy dispuesto a cumplir la penitencia que me imponga. ¿Debe realmente irse su amiga, señorita Olive? —le preguntó a su prima, y sin esperar la respuesta volvió a dirigirse a Verena—: ¿Huye usted del hombre individualmente considerado?

La joven se rió con una risa que pareció fundir en un líquido sus palabras.

—Oh, no, individualmente me agradan.

Como encarnación de un «movimiento», Ransom pensó que era más y más singular, y se preguntó cómo habría hecho para conectar tan rápidamente con su prima, para quien unas cuantas horas atrás era una absoluta desconocida. Esas debían de ser, indudablemente, las prácticas normales entre las mujeres. Le pidió nuevamente que se sentara; tenía la seguridad de que la señorita Chancellor sentiría tener que separarse de ella. Verena le lanzó una mirada a su amiga, no para solicitar una autorización sino para manifestarle su simpatía y se dejó caer en una silla. Ransom esperó a que la señorita Chancellor hiciera lo propio. Ella le dio esta satisfacción después de una breve pausa, ya que no habría podido no hacerlo sin dar la impresión de querer herir a Verena; pero se mostró dura y desagradable. No había visto a nadie que se tomara las libertades que aquel desinhibido sureño se tomaba en su salón, un individuo al cual apenas había tratado y que se permitía extender invitaciones a sus visitas en sus propias narices. El que Verena consintiera en hacer lo que le pedían era resultado de una carencia de «educación familiar» (así denominó la señorita Chancellor aquella cualidad que le faltaba) que nunca supuso que tuviera la joven: por fortuna en Charles Street la recibiría en abundancia. (Por supuesto Olive consideraba que la «educación familiar» era perfectamente compatible con la más total emancipación.) Verena aceptó la solicitud de Basil Ransom con absoluta buena fe; pero su aguda sensibilidad descubrió al momento que a su amiga le había desagradado. Difícilmente lograba comprender qué

podía haberla irritado, pero en ese mismo instante tuvo una visión de las angustias (de este género, por ejemplo, tan imprevistas e inexplicables) que las relaciones íntimas con la señorita Chancellor debían de entrañar.

—Ahora me gustaría que me dijera —dijo Basil Ransom, inclinándose hacia Verena, con las manos sobre las rodillas, olvidándose completamente de la presencia de su prima— si realmente cree en todas esas graciosas fantasías de las que nos habló anoche. Yo hubiera podido escucharla durante otra hora; pero nunca había oído monstruosidades semejantes. Debo protestar… Debo hacerlo, como un hombre vilipendiado y calumniado. Confiese que lo que hizo fue una especie de *reductio ad absurdum*... una sátira sobre la señora Farrinder. —Hablaba con la mayor libertad posible, con su amable cadencia del Sur.

Verena lo miró con ojos desorbitados.

—¡Cómo! —exclamó—. ¿No me querrá usted decir que no cree en nuestra causa?

—Claro que no, claro que no —respondió Ransom con una sonrisa—. Me parece que están ustedes sobre una pista falsa. ¿Consideran realmente que su sexo no ha tenido ninguna influencia? ¿Influencia? ¡Vamos! Nos han llevado ustedes por las orejas hasta la situación en que ahora estamos. En el fondo de todas las cosas están ustedes.

—Sí, sí, pero queremos estar en la cima —dijo Verena.

—El fondo es el mejor lugar, tenga la seguridad, ya que desde allí se logra mover la masa entera. Además, ustedes están también en la cima; están en todas partes, en todas las cosas. Yo sostengo la opinión de aquel personaje histórico, ¿no era acaso un rey?, que pensaba que detrás de cada situación había una dama. Se trate de lo que se trate lo único que hay que hacer es buscar a la dama; ella es la explicación. Bueno, yo siempre estoy en busca de ella, y siempre la encuentro. Por supuesto que siempre me produce un gran placer; pero eso viene a probar que es ella el motor universal. ¿No querrá usted negar ese poder, el poder de poner en movimiento a los hombres? En el fondo de todas las guerras están ustedes.

—Bueno, yo soy como la señora Farrinder; me gusta la oposición —exclamó Verena con una sonrisa feliz.

—Lo que viene a probar, como yo sostengo, no obstante todas sus reiteradas expresiones de horror, que ustedes se extasían de emoción ante una batalla. ¿Qué me

puede decir de Elena de Troya y de la atroz carnicería que provocó? Por todos es sabido que la emperatriz de Francia estaba en el fondo de la última guerra que sostuvo aquel país. Y en lo que respecta a nuestros cuatro años de terrible matanza, por supuesto, no va a negar usted que las damas fueron precisamente las fuerzas motrices. Los abolicionistas la desencadenaron. ¿Y no fueron los abolicionistas sobre todo mujeres? ¿Quién fue esa celebridad que mencionaron anoche…? Eliza P. Moseley. Yo considero que Eliza ha sido la causa de la peor guerra de la que la historia guarda recuerdo.

Basil Ransom disfrutaba más aún de su humor porque Verena parecía también disfrutar de él.

—Bien, señor, usted también debería subir a la tribuna; deberíamos actuar juntos como el veneno y su antídoto.

La mirada que en ese momento la joven le dirigió a Ransom le hizo sentir que la había convencido, por el momento, todo lo que era necesario. En la cara de Verena, sin embargo, aquella mirada duró solo un instante, pues al siguiente ya había observado a Olive Chancellor, que, con los ojos clavados intensamente en el suelo (una actitud que iba a conocer en demasía) tenía una extraña expresión. La muchacha se levantó lentamente. Consideró que debía marcharse. Supuso que a la señorita Chancellor no le resultaba simpático aquel apuesto bromista (eso fue lo que le pareció Basil Ransom) y le impresionó la idea de que su amiga fuese tal vez (por el momento) bastante más seria que ella en lo que se refería a la situación de la mujer; tan seria como hasta ese momento ella creía ser.

—Me gustaría tanto tener el placer de volver a verla —continuó Ransom—. Me siento capaz de interpretar para usted la historia a una nueva luz.

—Sería para mí un placer verlo en mi casa.

Apenas habían enunciado estas palabras los labios de Verena (su madre le había dicho que era la frase indicada cuando la gente expresaba el deseo de volver a verla; no debía dar la impresión de que deseaba ir a casa de los demás), apenas había pronunciado estas palabras cuando sintió la mano de la dueña de casa sobre su brazo y advirtió una mirada de apasionada solicitud en los ojos de Olive.

—Apenas tendrá tiempo de tomar el autobús de Charles Street —murmuró la joven con esforzada dulzura.

Lo único que Verena comprendió es que ya debía partir, y la respuesta más simple fue la de besar a la señorita Chancellor, lo que hizo de inmediato. Basil Ransom entendió todavía menos, y fue el triste comentario sobre su declaración de que los hombres no son inferiores por lo que ese encuentro no llegó a su fin, no obstante su rapidez, sin que hubiera metido la pata, lo que necesariamente agravaba los errores que tenía ya en su haber. Había sido invitado por la pequeña profetisa, y sin embargo no había sido invitado; pero no debía lamentarse demasiado porque al día siguiente debía por fuerza salir de Boston y, además, la señorita Chancellor parecía tener algo que decirle al respecto. Le tendió la mano a Verena y dijo:

—Adiós, señorita Tarrant. ¿Tendremos el placer de escucharla en Nueva York? Me temo que allá hemos caído demasiado bajo.

—Por supuesto que me gustaría elevar mi voz en la más grande de las ciudades —respondió la joven.

—Entonces trate de ir. No la refutaré. Sería el nuestro un mundo, después de todo, muy estúpido, si siempre supiésemos lo que las mujeres van a decir.

Verena era consciente de que el autobús de Charles Street estaba por pasar así como del malestar que la señorita Chancellor experimentaba; pero se detuvo aún lo suficiente para decirle que él tenía ideas muy anticuadas y que consideraba a las mujeres como un juguete de los hombres.

—¡No diga un juguete, diga un gozo! —exclamó Ransom—. Hay una afirmación que me gustaría aventurar; soy tan partidario de ustedes como lo son ustedes entre sí.

—¡Sabe mucho sobre el particular! —dijo Verena con una amplia sonrisa a Olive Chancellor.

A los ojos de Olive, apareció en ese momento más hermosa que nunca; sin embargo, no hubo ningún indicio de este júbilo interior en la magnífica sentenciosidad con que, dirigiéndose al señor Ransom, observó:

—No trataré de explicarle ahora lo que pueden ser las mujeres una para la otra, pero lo que la verdad pueda representar para un espíritu humano, eso creo que solo una mujer puede llegar a sospecharlo, aunque sea vagamente.

—¿La verdad? Querida prima, la verdad de ustedes es la cosa más vana.

—¡Oh, cielos! —gritó Verena; y la alegre vibración de su voz al emitir esta simple exclamación fue lo último que Ransom oyó de ella.

La señorita Chancellor la hizo salir de la habitación, dejando al joven la tarea de saborear la inefable ironía con que ella había pronunciado las palabras «solo una mujer». Era de suponerse que ella reaparecería, pero nada en la mirada que le había dirigido, antes de darle la espalda, parecía confirmarlo. Permaneció allí de pie un momento pensativo; luego, con una mezcla de curiosidad, se sumergió en la lectura de un libro, que, siguiendo su costumbre en esos casos, había tomado mecánicamente, y en el que con rapidez se interesó. Lo leyó durante cinco minutos en una posición bastante incómoda, y se olvidó por completo de que había sido abandonado. Se dio cuenta de este hecho por la entrada a la sala de la señora Luna, vestida como si estuviera por salir a la calle, y poniéndose nuevamente los guantes (parecía pasar todo el tiempo quitándose y poniéndose los guantes), quiso saber qué estaba haciendo allí enteramente solo… y si su hermana había ya sido advertida de su presencia.

—Oh, sí —dijo Ransom—, acaba de estar aquí, pero ha bajado a acompañar a la señorita Tarrant.

—¿Y quién demonios es la señorita Tarrant?

A Ransom le sorprendió que la señora Luna no supiera nada sobre la intimidad existente entre ambas damas, a pesar de que su trato era tan reciente. Pero, al parecer, la señorita Olive no le había mencionado a su nueva amiga.

—Bueno, es una oradora de gran inspiración… ¡la criatura más encantadora que existe en el mundo!

La señora Luna interrumpió por un momento la manipulación de sus guantes, lo contempló con una mirada entre sorprendida y divertida, y luego hizo resonar en la sala una carcajada.

—¿No me va a decir que ya lo han convertido…? ¿Tan pronto?

—Convertido a la señorita Tarrant, decididamente sí.

—Usted no va a pertenecerle a ninguna señorita Tarrant, usted me va a pertenecer a mí —dijo la señora Luna, que había pensado durante las últimas veinticuatro horas en su pariente del Sur, y había considerado que era un hombre interesante para una mujer

sola. Luego añadió—: ¿Vino usted aquí para encontrarse con ella? ¿Con esa oradora tan inspirada?

—No, vine solo a despedirme de su hermana.

—¿En verdad se marcha? No he logrado hacerle que me prometa ni siquiera la mitad de las cosas que me interesan de usted. Pero eso lo arreglaremos en Nueva York. ¿Cómo ha resultado su encuentro con Olive Chancellor? —continuó la señora Luna. Era su costumbre hablar de su hermana llamándola con el nombre completo, y se hubiera podido suponer, por la manera habitual en que se refería a ella, que Olive era bastante mayor, a pesar de haber nacido diez años después de Adeline. Se servía de todos los modos posibles para hacer advertir el abismo que las separaba; pero ahora, tendió un puente diciendo alegremente—: ¿No es cierto que es una cosita vieja encantadora?

Aquel puente, Random pudo verlo muy bien, no podía sostener su propio peso, y aquella pregunta le pareció más cargada de audacia que de juicio. ¿Por qué tenía que ser tan insincera? Debía saber que un hombre no podía reconocer a la señorita Chancellor en una descripción como aquella. No era vieja, era una mujer tajantemente joven; y le resultaba inconcebible, aunque había visto que la pequeña profetisa se despedía de ella con un beso, que alguien pudiera llamarla «encantadora». No se podía hablar de ella como si fuera una cosa cuando era tan intensa, tan terriblemente persona. Dudó un instante y luego respondió:

—Es una mujer verdaderamente notable.

—¡Cuidado! ¡No sea atolondrado! —gritó la señora Luna—. ¿La encuentra usted realmente terrible?

—No diga usted nada contra mi prima —respondió Basil; y en ese momento la señorita Chancellor volvió a entrar en la habitación.

Murmuró alguna excusa por haberlo hecho esperar tanto tiempo, pero su hermana la interrumpió pidiéndole información sobre la señorita Tarrant.

—El señor Ransom la considera absolutamente encantadora. ¿Por qué no me la has presentado? ¿Quieres disfrutarla solo tú?

La mirada de Olive se detuvo por un momento en el rostro de la señora Luna, sin responder. Luego dijo:

—Te has puesto mal el velo, Adeline.

—Por supuesto que te parezco un monstruo. ¿Es esto lo que me quieres decir? —exclamó Adeline, dirigiéndose hacia el espejo y arreglándose el velo criticado.

La señorita Chancellor no volvió a pedirle al señor Ransom que se sentara; parecía dar por hecho que él debía marcharse. Pero, en cambio, él volvió al tema de Verena. Preguntó si consideraba que la joven se iba a convertir en una figura pública. ¿Haría giras como la señora Farrinder?

—¡Convertirse en una figura pública! —repitió Olive—. ¡Pública! Por supuesto no va a imaginarse usted que una voz tan pura como la suya pueda ser silenciada.

—Oh, no, no silenciada. Es una voz demasiado dulce para eso. Pero tampoco se la debe hacer aullar; no se la debe forzar, ni exasperar, ni arruinar. No debería volverse como las otras. Debería permanecer al margen.

—Al margen… *¿al margen?* —dijo la señorita Chancellor—. ¡Cuando todas velaremos por ella, nos reuniremos en torno a ella, rezaremos por ella! —Había en su voz un desdén excesivo—. Si yo puedo ayudarla, se convertirá en una fuerza inmensa para el bien.

—¡Una fuerza inmensa para los cuáqueros, mi querida señorita Olive! —Estas palabras salieron de los labios de Basil Ransom a pesar del voto que se había hecho de no decir nada que pudiera exasperar a su prima, quien se encontraba en un estado de tensión que era difícil no advertir. Pero había bajado el tono hasta convertirlo en una súplica amistosa y la palabra ofensiva fue mitigada por su sonrisa.

Ella dio unos pasos hacia atrás como si su primo la hubiese empujado.

—¿Lo ve? Ahora sí ha sido atolondrado —exclamó la señora Luna, que se arreglaba una cinta frente al espejo.

—Pienso que no interferiría en nuestros asuntos si advirtiera lo poco que nos comprende —le dijo la señorita Chancellor a Ransom.

—¿A quiénes? ¿A todos los miembros de su sexo encantador? Yo no la comprendo a usted, señorita Olive.

—Venga conmigo y yo se lo explicaré todo de camino —dijo la señora Luna al terminar de arreglarse.

Ransom tendió la mano en señal de despedida, pero a Olive le resultó imposible hacer algo que no fuera ignorar ese gesto. No podía permitir que la tocara.

—Bueno, entonces, si van a exhibirla ante el público, llévenla a Nueva York —le dijo, tratando todavía de tomar las cosas a la ligera.

—En Nueva York a quien tendrá usted será a mí; no tendrá necesidad de nadie más —exclamó con coquetería la señora Luna—. He decidido pasar ahí el invierno.

Olive Chancellor miró a uno y luego al otro de sus dos familiares, uno próximo y otro distante, pero ambos igualmente poco simpáticos, con ella, y le vino a la mente que se sentiría más protegida si aquellos dos se unían, así cada uno neutralizaría al otro. Nunca antes se le había ocurrido una idea semejante, y que aquella repentina sutileza se le hubiera ocurrido como un talismán momentáneo nos da la medida de su nerviosismo en aquel momento.

—Si puedo llevarla a Nueva York la llevaré también más lejos —comentó Olive tratando de ser enigmática.

—Hablas de «llevarla» como si fueras un empresario de conferencias. ¿Te vas a dedicar a esa profesión? —preguntó la señora Luna.

Ransom no pudo dejar de advertir que la señorita Chancellor no estrecharía su mano, y se sintió, en general, bastante ofendido. Hizo una pausa antes de salir de la habitación, con la mano puesta en el pomo de la puerta.

—Vamos a ver, señorita Olive, ¿por qué me escribió pidiéndome que viniera a visitarla?

Hizo esta pregunta con una expresión no carente de alegría, pero sus ojos mostraban un poco de aquella luz amarillenta que ya hemos mencionado. La señora Luna bajaba ya las escaleras, de modo que sus compañeros quedaron solos cara a cara.

—Pregúntaselo a mi hermana… creo que ella se lo dirá —dijo Olive, apartándose de él y caminando hasta la ventana.

Permaneció allí, mirando hacia el exterior; oyó cuándo la puerta de la casa se cerraba y vio a la pareja cruzar la calle. Cuando desaparecieron de su vista, sus dedos comenzaron a tamborilear delicadamente sobre el cristal; le pareció que había tenido una inspiración.

Mientras tanto Basil Ransom había repetido la pregunta a la señora Luna.

—Si no iba a mostrarme ninguna simpatía, ¿por qué entonces me pidió que viniera?

—Porque quería que me conociera usted… ¡Sabía que iba a gustarme!

Y al parecer estaba en lo cierto; ya que la señora Luna, cuando llegaron a Beacon Street, no permitió de ninguna manera que la dejara continuar sola; se negó terminantemente a tomar en consideración la excusa de que solo pasaría una o dos horas más en Boston (debía viajar, para ahorrar, en barco) y debía dedicar esas horas a su trabajo. Apeló a su cortesía sureña, y no en vano; en la práctica, al menos, Ransom admitía los derechos de la mujer.

XIII

La señora Tarrant, como es de imaginarse, quedó encantada con la descripción que su hija le hizo de la casa de la señorita Chancellor y el recibimiento que allí se le dispensó; y Verena durante el siguiente mes acudió muy a menudo a la casa de Charles Street.

—Es suficiente con que seas tan agradable como sabes serlo —le había dicho la señora Tarrant, reflexionando complacida en que su hija lo era realmente; sabía comportarse bien en esas ocasiones.

Y nadie se lo había enseñado; esa parte de la educación de las jóvenes que se denomina «urbanidad y distinción social» no había figurado de un modo preponderante en el currículum de la señorita Tarrant. Se le había enseñado que no debía mentir ni robar, pero, en cambio, sobre normas sociales era muy poco lo que sabía. Su única gran ventaja, en ese terreno, era el ejemplo de sus padres. Su madre la consideraba inteligente y graciosa y constantemente la sometía a exhaustivos interrogatorios sobre el progreso de aquel episodio tan interesante; no veía por qué este no debería ser, como decía, un «sostén» permanente para Verena. Cuando la señora Tarrant meditaba sobre el futuro de su hija jamás tomaba en consideración que un buen matrimonio podría ser la justa recompensa a sus esfuerzos. Se hubiera considerado del todo inmoral en el caso de dedicarse a buscar un buen partido para su hija; carecía, en efecto, de una fe auténtica en la existencia de tales ministros del destino. Todos los hombres ricos que había conocido estaban casados, y los solteros, que por lo general eran muy jóvenes, no se distinguían demasiado por la cuantía de sus ingresos, lo que de ninguna manera se tomaba en consideración, sino por el grado de interés en las ideas renovadoras. Suponía que Verena se casaría algún día con uno de ellos, y esperaba que ese personaje

estuviera relacionado con la vida pública: y vida pública para la señora Tarrant significaba que el nombre del joven estuviera en un lugar muy visible, en las marquesinas o en un cartel en colores a la entrada de Tremont Temple. Pero no tenía prisa por ver realizarse aquel sueño, ya que las perspectivas que implicaba un matrimonio carecían por lo general de brillo: consistían en una mujer fatigada, con un niño colgado al cuello, soplando en un hornillo a fin de obtener un poco de calor. Una amistad realmente íntima con una joven «con clase» podría llenar de una manera agradable el período que debía transcurrir antes de que Verena se enfrentara a esa dura suerte. Sería extraordinario para ella tener un lugar al que ir cuando sintiera la necesidad de cambiar de aires, y, desde luego no se podía predecir, pero podía darse el hecho de que la joven acabara teniendo dos hogares. En lo referente a la idea de hogar, la señora Tarrant, como la mayor parte de las mujeres americanas de su clase, sentía una intensa reverencia; en su ingenuidad estaba convencida de que en medio de todas las vicisitudes pasadas en los últimos veinte años, ella había mantenido vivo el espíritu de semejante institución. Si para Verena existía por duplicado, la muchacha podía considerarse verdaderamente afortunada.

Pero todo aquello no era nada, sin embargo, comparado con el hecho de que la señorita Chancellor parecía pensar que el don de su joven amiga era en realidad producto de la inspiración, o, de cualquier manera, como a menudo decía Selah, una virtud excepcional. No lograba tener una idea muy clara, por los relatos de Verena, de lo que en realidad pensaba la señorita Chancellor; pero la señora Tarrant no sabía qué cosa podía interesarle a la otra joven de su hija si no eran sus condiciones para cautivar al público. Y se sentía muy satisfecha de que Verena respondiera voluntariamente a aquella simpatía sin necesidad de presiones; no le preocupaba en absoluto todo lo que gastaba en transportes, y en verdad la hija le había dicho que la señorita Chancellor se obstinaba en llenarle los bolsillos con billetes de tranvía. Al principio Verena había ido para satisfacer a su madre; pero ahora era evidente que hacía las visitas por propio deseo. Hablaba de su amiga con la mayor admiración; decía que le había llevado un poco de tiempo comprenderla, pero ahora que lo había logrado, bueno, consideraba que era una mujer realmente espléndida. Y cuando Verena sentía admiración no había quien pudiera superarla y era un placer ver los estímulos

que le proporcionaba su joven amiga de Charles Street. Que ambas sintieran una recíproca amistad, eso quedaba fuera de cualquier duda; y difícilmente se podría decir cuál de las dos admiraba más a la otra. Cada una consideraba a la otra como un dechado de nobleza. La señora Tarrant estaba convencida de que entre ambas lograrían conmover a cualquier público. Lo que Verena necesitaba era alguien que supiera dirigirla (su padre hasta el momento no había logrado dirigir con éxito nada salvo sus curas), y tal vez la señorita Chancellor podría dirigirla mejor que todos aquellos que tenían una profesión específica.

—Es magnífico el modo en que logra que una se revele a sí misma —le dijo un día Verena a su madre—. Hay en ella algo tan profundamente perspicaz que el primer día que fui a visitarla tuve la impresión de que encarnaba mi idea del día del Juicio. Pero a la vez sabe mostrar todo lo que hay en su interior, y entonces uno puede saber lo encantadora que es. Es todo lo pura que alguien pueda ser; ya te convencerás cuando la conozcas. Es tan noble que te hace sentir deseos de elevarte a su nivel. Nada que no sea la redención de nuestro sexo le interesa; todo lo que desea es poder participar en la realización de ese ideal. Puedo decirte que me entusiasma, sí, mamá, en verdad. No se preocupa absolutamente de su vestido, solo de tener un salón elegante. Bueno, y lo tiene; es un lugar donde sentarse es ya un ensueño. La próxima semana va a poner una planta en el interior. Dice que le gustaría verme sentada debajo de una planta. Me imagino que ha de ser alguna idea oriental, una moda que han introducido últimamente en París. En general no le gustan las ideas francesas. Tiene ya tantas ideas propias que no necesita pedirle prestadas otras a nadie. Me sentaré bajo un bosque para oír cómo las desarrolla —continuó Verena con tierna admiración—. La he visto temblar cuando describe todo lo que ha sufrido nuestro sexo. Para mí es muy interesante oír las cosas que he sentido siempre. Si no le tuviera tanto miedo al público, me superaría con gran ventaja. Pero ella no quiere hablar ante un auditorio; quiere solo instruirme. Madre, si no lo logra, si no logra que atraiga yo la atención del público es que no hay ninguna atención que atraer. Dice que poseo el don de la elocuencia, y no le interesa saber de dónde proviene. Dice que es una gran fortuna para cualquier movimiento contar con alguien tan joven y brillante que lo encarne. Bueno, lo cierto es que soy joven y me siento lo suficientemente brillante como para realizar lo que ya he comenzado. Dice que

la serenidad que logro cuando me expongo a la mirada de centenares de personas es ya en sí un mérito; en realidad considera esta serenidad como un don celestial. Ella no lo ha recibido; es la mujer más emotiva que haya conocido jamás. Quiere saber cómo es posible que pueda yo hablar como lo hago sin siquiera sentirlo; y, por supuesto, le digo que sí siento lo que digo. Parece estar observándose todo el tiempo; nunca he visto a nadie que se conceda tan poco reposo. Dice que debo cumplir una gran misión, y me hace sentir que tal es mi obligación. Dice que debo ejercer una gran influencia sobre el público, y yo le respondo que si lo logro será solo bajo la influencia de ella.

Selah Tarrant consideraba todo esto desde un punto de vista más elevado que el de su mujer; al menos su solemnidad era tal que parecía implicar esa altura de miras. No se abandonaba a ninguna conclusión precipitada sobre la posibilidad de que su hija fuera tan bien recibida por una simpatizante de las ideas renovadoras, que además tenía una fortuna: consideraba solo a su hija desde el punto de vista de los servicios que podía rendir a la humanidad. Mantener sus ideales orientados en la justa dirección y estimular su vida moral: ese debía ser el deber fundamental de un padre tan estrechamente identificado con revelaciones y panaceas, una tarea más seria que verla sostener provechosas relaciones mundanas. Como Selah permanecía fuera de casa la mayor parte del tiempo no podía observar las idas y venidas de su hija, y mostraba estar solo muy vagamente informado de quién podía ser aquella señorita Chancellor, actualmente objeto de frecuentes alusiones por parte de su mujer. La aparición inicial de Verena en Boston (como él definía su actuación en casa de la señorita Birdseye) había sido un verdadero éxito; y esta reflexión acentuaba su habitual expresión sacerdotal. Su aspecto era el del sacerdote de una religión que pasaba por la fase de los milagros; su responsabilidad se manifestaba en un engrandecimiento general de su persona, de sus gestos (mantenía ya siempre las manos en alto, como si posara para un fotógrafo), de sus palabras, de sus frases y hasta de su sonrisa, tan inaudible como un gozne aceitado, y de los pliegues de su inseparable impermeable. Era incapaz de dar una respuesta directa o de manifestar abiertamente una opinión en la ocasión más simple, y su tono de alta filosofía se acentuaba mientras más trivial o doméstico fuera el tema tratado. Si su mujer le preguntaba a la hora de cenar si estaban buenas las patatas, él respondía que las encontraba del todo excelentes (definía también como

«excelentes» los periódicos y aplicaba este epíteto a los objetos más variados), y se enfrascaba en una disertación digna de Plutarco para comparar las patatas con otros especímenes del reino vegetal. Producía, o trataba de producir, la impresión de mirar por encima y más allá de todas las cosas, de no interesarse en lo inmediato sino tener siempre fija la mirada en metas lejanas. En realidad la única cosa que absorbía todas sus preocupaciones era el deseo de que los periódicos publicaran párrafos enteros dedicados a él, párrafos de los que hasta el momento había sido el sujeto, pero en los cuales compartía ahora la gloria con su hija. Los periódicos eran su mundo, y a sus ojos la expresión más rica de la vida humana. A su modo de ver, si algún día se llegaba a crear en la tierra un orden divino sería a través de abundantes artículos publicados en la prensa. Esperaba con ansiedad el momento en que Verena fuese mencionada en las columnas dedicadas a las «personalidades famosas», y, a sus ojos, las personas afortunadas en sumo grado eran aquellas (¡y las había!) a quienes los periódicos dedicaban algunas líneas todos los días. Nada menor a esto podría satisfacer a Selah Tarrant. Su ideal de felicidad era poder aparecer de modo regular, y ser una parte tan indispensable del periódico como el título y la fecha, y la lista de incendios, o la columna de chistes sobre el Oeste. La visión de aquella publicidad acariciaba sus sueños y a ella gustosamente sacrificaría la más íntima santidad del hogar. El objeto de la vida humana consistía, para él, en obtener la mayor publicidad, y el único defecto podía consistir en no lograr todo el objetivo deseado. Había habido en el pasado una revista espiritista que se había ocupado abundantemente de él; pero no había logrado atraer por aquel medio la atención general hacia su personalidad; y para colmo aquella publicación estaba en la actualidad, según él, muy pasada de moda. El éxito no sería éxito sino hasta el día en que el *physique* de su hija, y el rumor de su compromiso matrimonial, fueran incluidos en la sección de notas de sociedad con la certidumbre de obtener una mayor difusión.

La fama de las proezas de Verena en el Oeste no se había abierto paso hasta la Costa Este con la rapidez que él había esperado; y la razón de ello, consideraba, estribaba en el hecho de que las pocas conferencias que había dado no habían sido anunciadas de antemano, con previa venta de billetes, sino que fueron meros incidentes, improvisaciones surgidas en medio de reuniones tumultuosas, donde había habido otros

oradores mejor tratados por la fama. No habían producido dinero, habían sido discursos pronunciados solo por amor a la causa. Si solo se hubiera hecho público que ella hablaba gratuitamente, eso hubiese despertado un interés mayor; el único problema era que el prestarse a hablar gratuitamente no era el mejor modo de recordarle que tenía una hija que remuneraba sus esfuerzos. Tampoco era un modo de obtener prestigio, pensaba Selah Tarrant; porque había una multitud de personas que conocían, igual que su hija, el modo de no obtener ningún beneficio económico. Hablar, tal era el objetivo que trataba de lograr mucha gente, hablar por nada. No era precisamente ese el terreno donde uno podía aparecer como un individuo desinteresado. Ser desinteresado era incompatible con la idea de beneficios; y los beneficios eran algo que Selah Tarrant tomaba muy en consideración. Deseaba ver llegar el día en que afluyeran copiosamente; el lector tal vez logre ver el gesto con el cual, en sus coloquios interiores, acompañaba esa imagen mental.

Le parecía que no estaba ya muy lejos el día de la cosecha, se había aproximado de una manera muy considerable gracias a esa velada afortunada en casa de la señorita Birdseye. Si la señora Farrinder aceptara escribir una «carta abierta» sobre Verena, eso la favorecería más que cualquier cosa. Selah no se caracterizaba por la agudeza de percepción, pero conocía lo suficientemente bien el mundo en que vivía para ser consciente de que la señora Farrinder podía «promoverla», como acostumbraban a decir en Pennsylvania, donde había vivido antes de ser vendedor ambulante de lápices. La señora Farrinder no siempre contemplaba las cosas con la perspectiva que uno pudiera desear, y si él no lograba hacer que rindiera un tributo público a Verena, no había otro medio que la ingeniosa mente de Tarrant pudiera conocer para lograr la ansiada promoción. Si uno deseaba un favor de la señora Farrinder, no era necesario sino esperar con paciencia, de la misma manera que uno espera que el termómetro registre un alza de temperatura. Él le había confiado sus deseos a la señorita Birdseye, y ella parecía creer, por la manera en que se había conmovido su célebre amiga, que un día u otro esta haría saber al público todo lo que había sentido. Desde aquella noche la señora Farrinder estaba fuera de la ciudad, pero la señorita Birdseye parecía pensar que a su regreso a Roxbury llamaría a Verena para impartirle instrucciones. De cualquier manera, entretanto, Selah estaba seguro de que tenía una buena carta en la

mano; olía que había dinero en el aire. Ya hay que decir que habían recibido algunos ingresos provenientes de Charles Street; aquella rica y extravagante joven parecía querer entregarse por entero. Él fingía, como ya he indicado, no advertir nada, pero nunca veía Selah Tarrant las cosas con mayor claridad que cuando fijaba su mirada en las cornisas. No tenía la más mínima duda de que si hubiera decidido, una de aquellas noches, alquilar una sala de conferencias, ella hubiera pedido que le pasaran la cuenta. Eso era lo que en aquellos días lo tenía preocupado. No estaba seguro si debía alquilar un local a fin de que Verena saltara de inmediato a la fama, o esperar a que hiciera unas cuantas apariciones más en privado, a fin de que la curiosidad le preparara el terreno.

Estas meditaciones lo acompañaban en su múltiple vagabundeo a través de las calles y suburbios de la capital de Nueva Inglaterra. Como ya he dicho permanecía «fuera» durante largas horas: largos períodos en los cuales la señora Tarrant, manteniendo las fuerzas con un huevo hervido y un bizcocho, se preguntaba cómo podía hacer él para despreocuparse de las solicitudes del estómago. Él no comía sino un trozo de pastel cuando llegaba a casa; lo único que exigía era que se lo sirvieran caliente. La señora Tarrant había llegado al final a convencerse de que en casa de sus pacientes femeninos comería algunos pequeños almuerzos; aplicaba este nombre a cualquier alimento ingerido fuera de horas. Es mi obligación transcribir que en una ocasión en que ella le manifestó sus sospechas, Selah le hizo observar que el único alimento de que se nutría era la convicción de que estaba haciendo el bien. Este esfuerzo se manifestaba de diversas maneras: incluía entre otras cosas un deambular constante por las calles, la frecuentación de las terminales de carruajes, estaciones ferroviarias, tiendas «en liquidación». Pero los lugares donde era mejor conocido eran las oficinas de los periódicos y los vestíbulos de los hoteles: esas salas pavimentadas de mármol, propicias para toda reunión informal, que ofrecen a la calle, a través de las altas ventanas de cristal, la imagen del ciudadano americano sostenido en el aire. Allí, en medio de montañas de equipaje, escupideras colocadas en sitios estratégicos, los desconsolados «huéspedes», los malhumorados porteros irlandeses, la multitud de hombres con chaquetas raídas y extraños sombreros, que escribían cartas sobre mesas cubiertas de anuncios, Selah Tarrant se dedicaba a meditar durante largas horas. Nunca habría podido decir en qué estaba meditando: solo tenía la sensación genérica de que

tales lugares eran los centros neurálgicos de la nación, y que mientras más se les frecuentara más estaba uno en el sitio indicado. La *penetralia* de la prensa diaria era no obstante mucho más fascinante, y el hecho de que fuera menos accesible, que el camino a esos locales se encontrara colmado de obstáculos, solo acrecentaba su deseo de forzar el ingreso. Encontraba para ello un sinnúmero de pretextos; a veces llegaba a presentar colaboraciones, era persistente y testarudo, y todos lo conocían como el infatigable Tarrant. Cuando lograba entrar, permanecía sentado durante horas y horas, quitándole el tiempo a las personas ocupadas en su trabajo, refugiándose en los talleres cuando había sido echado de las oficinas, conversaba con los linotipistas hasta que aquellos comenzaban a imprimir sus comentarios por error, y con los impresores cuando los linotipistas le habían dado la espalda. Estaba siempre interesado en saber «qué ocurría»; le habría gustado fundirse con aquellos metales y, al no lograrlo, esperaba que le insertaran algún anuncio gratuitamente. Deseaba más que nada en el mundo que alguien le hiciera una entrevista y eso lo llevaba a aparecer constantemente en las oficinas de redacción. En una ocasión creyó haberlo logrado, y los grandes titulares bailaron ante sus ojos durante días, pero la entrevista nunca apareció. Soñaba con vengarse de esto el día en que Verena triunfara, e imaginaba ya con qué actitud recibiría a los reporteros que llegaran a visitar a su hija.

XIV

—Debemos buscar a otra persona con quien pueda conversar —dijo la señora Tarrant—. Me imagino que a ella no le interesará venir a vernos solo a nosotros.

«Ella», en las conversaciones entre madre e hija en ese período, no podía ser sino Olive Chancellor, de quien se hablaba en la pequeña casa de Cambridge a toda hora del día y desde todos los posibles puntos de vista. No era ahora nunca Verena quien iniciaba la conversación, pues estaba ya bastante fatigada de charlar sobre el tema; tenía un modo de ver la situación diferente al de su madre, y si se prestaba a escuchar las largas consideraciones de la señora Tarrant, era por considerarlo el mejor sistema para poder guardar para sí misma sus propias ideas.

La señora Tarrant abrigaba la idea de que a ella (la señora Tarrant) le gustaba estudiar a la gente y ahora se había entregado al análisis del carácter de la señorita Chancellor. Esto la llevaba muy lejos y a veces se presentaba a las horas más inesperadas para anunciar sus conclusiones. Entre sus propósitos se contaba el de interpretar el mundo a la mente ingenua de su hija, y traducía la personalidad de la señorita Chancellor con una confianza que tenía en muy escasa consideración el hecho de que solo la había visto una vez, mientras que Verena gozaba de ese privilegio casi a diario. Verena pensaba que para esa época conocía ya muy bien a Olive, y las complicadísimas versiones de las ideas y el temperamento ofrecidos por su madre (la señora Tarrant, con una idea absolutamente errada del sentido del término, hablaba siempre del temperamento de las personas) le hacían muy poca justicia al fenómeno de cuya observación disfrutaba en Charles Street. Olive era mucho más notable de lo que la señora Tarrant sospechaba, tan notable como la propia señora Tarrant creía ser. Olive había abierto los ojos de Verena a perspectivas luminosas, le había hecho creer a

la joven que tenía una misión divina, le había dado, como hemos visto, una medida completamente nueva de los valores de la vida. Esto para ella resultaba bastante más importante que conocer a las figuras del alto mundo en casa de Olive. Todavía no había encontrado allí a ninguna de ellas, con la excepción de la señora Luna; su nueva amiga parecía querer mantenerla solo para sí. Este era el único reproche que la señora Tarrant le había dirigido a la nueva amiga de su hija; se sentía desilusionada por el hecho de que Verena no hubiera penetrado más en el mundo elegante. Uno de los primeros artículos de su fe era que el mundo elegante era pérfido y vacío, y, además, Verena le había dicho que la señorita Chancellor sentía odio y desprecio por él. No hubiera sabido decir de qué modo pensaba que su hija podría beneficiarse en el trato con aquel medio (pues era famoso el modo en que aquellas damas rehuían el contacto de cualquier nuevo evangelio); sin embargo, se sentía desairada de que Verena no regresara con un poco más de la fragancia de Beacon Street. La misma joven hubiera sido la persona más interesada del mundo en conocer aquellas esferas de no haber sido también la más resignada; Verena era la mezcla más extraordinaria de interés y docilidad. La señora Tarrant teorizaba sobre temperamentos y amaba a su hija, pero era solo vagamente consciente de que a su lado se abría la más dulce flor de carácter (como podría decirse) que alguna vez hubiera florecido. Se sentía orgullosa del brillo de Verena, y de su talento especial; pero la vulgaridad de su propia superficie no era el mejor conductor para las virtudes de la hija. Por consiguiente consideraba necesario para el triunfo de su hija en la vida que conociera a algunos personajes de alto vuelo, aunque solo fuera para hacerlos sentir avergonzados; como si algo pudiera añadirse al triunfo de Verena que no fuera el supremo triunfo de ser simplemente como era.

La señora Tarrant había ido a la ciudad a hacer una visita a la señorita Chancellor; puso en práctica esta resolución, a la que había prestado infinitas consideraciones, independientemente de Verena. Había decidido aprovechar un pretexto cualquiera; su dignidad requería uno, dado que, en cualquier momento, sentía que el orgullo antiguo de los Greenstreet iba a ser puesto a prueba, de un modo terrible, debido a su curiosidad. Deseaba ver nuevamente a la señorita Chancellor y verla en medio de sus posesiones, que Verena le había descrito con tanta riqueza de detalles. Carecía del pretexto que le hubiese resultado más conveniente, que Olive hubiese ido a Cambridge a hacerles la

visita que había solicitado desde un comienzo; así que tuvo que echar mano de otro recurso… se convenció de que era su deber examinar el lugar donde su hija pasaba tanto tiempo. La señorita Chancellor pensaría que había ido a agradecerle su hospitalidad; sabía, por anticipado, el aire que debía adoptar (o se imaginaba que lo sabía… los aires de la señora Tarrant no siempre eran lo que ella suponía), o al menos una *nuance* (tenía también la impresión de conocer algo de francés) de su tono. Olive, después de un lapso de varias semanas, seguía sin manifestar ninguna simpatía a la idea de presentarse ante ellos, y la señora Tarrant le reprochó a Verena con cierta dureza el no haberla hecho sentir que le debía esa atención a la madre de una amiga. Verena no quería confesar que suponía que la señorita Chancellor no se interesaba demasiado en tal personaje, pues era evidente que la joven había advertido ese hecho y que lo atribuía a la extraordinaria amplitud de miras de Olive. La misma Verena no consideraba que su madre ocupara un lugar importante en el universo; y la señorita Chancellor se interesaba solo en asuntos de gran magnitud. Tampoco se sentía en libertad de informar (desde luego era ahora menos franca en casa, y, además, era una sospecha que apenas comenzaba a formular) de que Olive deseaba sustraerla de la casa de sus padres, y por consiguiente no estaba interesada en mantener y cultivar relaciones de amistad con ellos. La señora Tarrant (debo decirlo) tenía también otro motivo: vivía devorada por el deseo de encontrarse cara a cara con la señora Luna. Esta circunstancia podrá dar idea de la aridez de su vida, y si esto produce ese efecto no seré yo quien lo niegue. Ella conocía a todas las personas que asistían a conferencias, pero había momentos en que deseaba, para cambiar, ver a las que no asistían; y la señora Luna, según las descripciones de Verena, resumía las características de esa clase excéntrica.

Verena le había dedicado gran atención a la brillante hermana de Olive; le había revelado todos sus secretos a su amiga, todos menos uno pequeño, es decir, que si desde un principio ella hubiera podido elegir le habría gustado parecerse a la señora Luna. Esta dama la fascinaba, transportaba su imaginación a tierras extrañas; le hubiera gustado disfrutar alguna tarde entera a solas con ella, para poder, en esa ocasión, hacerle diez mil preguntas. Pero nunca la vio a solas, y de hecho no la veía sino por instantes. Adeline entraba y salía, se vestía para asistir a cenas y conciertos, diciendo

siempre alguna frase mundana a la muchacha de Cambridge, y algo a Olive, en un lenguaje tan libre que ella posiblemente nunca llegaría (una previsión errónea de su parte) a dominar. Pero la señorita Chancellor jamás la detenía, ni le ofrecía a Verena ninguna oportunidad para verla, como si no lograra imaginarse que pudiera tener el menor interés en semejante persona; solo volvía a tratar el tema cuando Adeline las dejaba… el tema que, por supuesto, era siempre el mismo, el tema de lo que harían juntas por su sexo sufriente. No era que a Verena no le interesara eso, de ninguna manera; en aquellos maravillosos coloquios con Olive se abrían ante ella las perspectivas más estimulantes; pero su fantasía hubiera deseado a veces dar algunos vuelcos a izquierda o derecha cuando otra distracción se cruzaba en su camino, y su compañera la guiaba, intelectualmente, en una danza en la que sus pies, su cabeza mejor dicho, le fallaban a veces debido a la fatiga. La señora Tarrant encontró a la señorita Chancellor en su casa, pero no tuvo la satisfacción de observar ni la menor vislumbre de la señora Luna, acontecimiento que Verena, en el fondo de su corazón, consideró afortunado, ya que se dijo que si su madre al volver de Charles Street le comenzó a describir la personalidad de la señorita Chancellor con renovada energía, como si ella (Verena) jamás la hubiese visto, y como si hasta ese momento nunca hubiesen hablado de ella, ¿cuáles no hubieran sido los desarrollos (de esa misma especie) a que un encuentro con Adeline hubiese dado lugar?

Cuando finalmente Verena le dijo a su amiga que consideraba oportuno que fuera de visita a Cambridge —no comprendía por qué no lo había hecho hasta entonces—, Olive expuso muy francamente sus razones: admitió tener celos, admitió no querer que la muchacha le perteneciera a nadie que no fuera ella. El señor y la señora Tarrant se valdrían de su autoridad, mostrarían sus derechos, y ella no quería verlos, no quería que le recordaran que también ellos existían. Esto era cierto, pero Olive no le podía decir toda la verdad a Verena, no podía decirle que odiaba a la detestable pareja de Cambridge. Como sabemos, se había prohibido experimentar ese sentimiento ante personas, individualmente consideradas, y se complacía en considerar a los Tarrant como categoría humana, una categoría deplorable, que, frente al público en general, no hacía sino desacreditar la causa de las nuevas verdades. Había hablado sobre ellos con la señorita Birdseye (Olive había comenzado a visitarla con frecuencia y a hacerle

constantes regalos, la buena dama aparecía en este período con maravillosos gorros y chales, y consideraba que nunca le podría estar lo suficientemente agradecida), y aun la vecina de la doctora Prance, cuya virulencia para denunciar los males imperantes vivía en la más feliz (aunque ilícita) unión con la manía de encontrar excusas; pues bien, la misma señorita Birdseye se vio obligada a confesar que, si se examinaba su historia, el pobre Selah no era gran cosa. Su mínima valía había sido intuida por Olive después de haber hecho hablar a Verena (cosa en la que la muchacha era de lo más explícita) sobre su padre y su madre, sin ser consciente de las conclusiones que le sugería a la señorita Chancellor. Tarrant era una moralista sin sentido moral, eso le resultaba muy claro a Olive después de oír a la hija hablar de su infancia y juventud, lo que Verena hacía con una extraordinaria y colorida simplicidad. Aunque este relato le resultó a la señorita Chancellor tremendamente fascinante, le produjo una infinidad de sensaciones contradictorias; le insinuó la duda de que la muchacha pudiera carecer también de la percepción para distinguir el bien y el mal. No; era extremadamente inocente; no comprendía, no interpretaba, no veía sino la fachada de lo que describía; de ningún modo se le podía ocurrir juzgar a sus padres. Olive había querido examinar las condiciones en las que su maravillosa amiga (cada día pensaba que era aún más maravillosa) se había desarrollado, y para este fin, como ya he dicho, la sometía a una enseñanza interminable. Pero ahora estaba satisfecha, su comprensión del carácter de su amiga era completa, y lo único que hubiera deseado imponer a la joven era una ruptura efectiva con el pasado. Un pasado que no podía deplorar de una manera definitiva, ya que tenía el mérito de haber iniciado a Verena (y a su patrocinadora, a través de ella) en las miserias y los misterios del pueblo. Tenía la teoría de que Verena (a pesar de la sangre de los Greenstreet, aunque, después de todo, ¿quiénes eran los Greenstreet?) era una flor de la gran Democracia, y que era imposible tener un origen menos distinguido que el mismo Tarrant. Su nacimiento en un lugar insignificante de Pennsylvania era indeciblemente bajo, y Olive se hubiera sentido muy desilusionada si no hubiera tenido él ese defecto. Le gustaba pensar que Verena había conocido durante la niñez una pobreza extrema, y había una especie de ferocidad en la alegría con la que reflexionaba sobre el hecho de que esa criatura delicada había sufrido (¡si solo esa necesidad hubiera durado un poco más!) hambre. A los ojos de Olive esos elementos

aumentaban su valor; le hacían sentir que su amistad sería por eso mismo infinitamente más seria. Por lo general se supone que los revolucionarios han sido siempre estimulados por las circunstancias, y las circunstancias hubieran sido bastante deficientes en este caso de no existir aquellos felices accidentes en el pasado de Verena. Cuando ella le transmitió de parte de su madre una invitación para ir a Cambridge en una ocasión determinada, Olive sintió que era el momento de hacer el gran esfuerzo. Los grandes esfuerzos no le eran desconocidos —ya vivir era en sí un gran esfuerzo— pero ese le pareció excepcionalmente cruel. Se decidió, de cualquier manera, a hacerlo, prometiéndose que esa primera visita a casa de la señora Tarrant sería también la última. Su único consuelo era que esperaba sufrir intensamente; pues la perspectiva de sufrir era siempre, espiritualmente hablando, como tener dinero a menudo en el bolsillo. Se convino en que Olive se presentaría a la hora del té (la comida que Selah había establecido como cena), cuando la señora Tarrant, como ya hemos mencionado, deseó honrarla con la presencia de otro huésped. Después de largas discusiones entre Verena y su madre se seleccionó al otro invitado, y la primera persona que Olive vio al entrar en la pequeña sala de Cambridge fue un joven con el cabello prematuramente, o mejor sería decir precozmente, cano, con el que tuvo la impresión de haberse ya encontrado antes, y que le fue presentado como el señor Matthias Pardon.

Sufrió menos de lo que había esperado; estaba muy conmovida observando el interior de la casa de Verena. Era de un mal gusto semejante al que había deseado; deseado para poder tener la sensación de que (al sacarla de semejante *milieu*) ella cumpliría con un deber llevándosela a vivir a su lado. Olive deseaba cada vez más poder extraer una promesa de ella; aún no podía decir en qué términos tendría que formularla; solo sentía que debía ser algo que tuviera un carácter sagrado e inviolable para Verena y que las ligase para toda la vida. En esta ocasión le pareció que se delineaba en su mente; comenzó a ver cuál debía ser, aunque se daba cuenta de que tal vez debía esperar a que se presentara la ocasión propicia. También la señora Tarrant se manifestaba totalmente en su propia casa; no había modo de dejar de dudar de su vulgaridad. Olive Chancellor despreciaba la vulgaridad, podía percibir su aroma con tal nitidez que a veces la descubría hasta en su propia familia, tanto que a menudo, con

un súbito rubor, descubría sus trazas hasta en la propia Adeline. Había días en que todo el mundo parecía estar contagiado de ese tufo, todos menos la señorita Birdseye (que no tenía nada que ver con ella: era una pieza de anticuario) y la gente más pobre y más humilde. Los obreros, las hilanderas, los más oscuros, solo esas personas estaban a salvo de la vulgaridad. La señorita Chancellor hubiera sido mucho más feliz si los movimientos en que se interesaba fueran llevados a cabo solo por las personas que le gustaban, y si las revoluciones, de alguna manera, comenzaran siempre dentro de las propias personas, con convulsiones internas, sacrificios, ejecuciones. Un fin común, desgraciadamente, aunque sus resultados puedan parecernos bellos, no vuelve impersonal a una comunidad.

La señora Tarrant, con su blanda corpulencia, le pareció a su invitada blancuzca y marchita; su cutis tenía una especie de brillo descolorido; su cabello, muy escaso, le caía sobre la frente *à la chinoise*; no tenía cejas, y sus ojos tenían una expresión fija como los de las figuras de cera. Cuando hablaba y trataba de insistir en algo (siempre estaba insistiendo en algo) hacía muecas que le deformaban la cara, en un esfuerzo por expresar lo inexpresable, lo que, después de todo, se reducía a cero. Tenía una especie de elegancia lúgubre, trataba de demostrar confianza, bajaba el tono de voz y miraba a su huésped como si quisiera establecer un entendimiento secreto, para preguntarle si por casualidad no deseaba un poco de fritura de manzana. Llevaba sobre los hombros un chal amplio que se parecía al impermeable de su marido: una prenda que cuando se dirigía hacia su hija y hablaba con ella parecía ser la túnica de una sacerdotisa de la maternidad. Se esforzaba por mantener la conversación dentro de ciertos canales que le permitían dirigirle algunas preguntas incoherentes a Olive, sobre todo referentes a si conocía a las principales damas (la expresión es de la señora Tarrant), no solo de Boston sino de otras ciudades que en su vida nómada también ella había visitado. Olive conocía a algunas, y de otras nunca había oído hablar; pero se sentía tan irritada que pretendió desconocerlas a todas (era consciente de que nunca había dicho tantas mentiras), lo que desconcertó considerablemente a la anfitriona, aunque sus preguntas habían sido hechas aparentemente sin ninguna malicia, puras y simples, sin intención de obtener revelaciones de ninguna especie.

XV

El señor Tarrant, no obstante, mantuvo un ojo puesto en esa dirección; fue solemnemente cortés con la señorita Chancellor; en la mesa le pasó una y otra vez los platos y se aventuró a declarar que la fritura de manzana era excelente; pero, fuera de esto, no hizo ninguna otra alusión a temas triviales, habló de la regeneración de la humanidad y de la esperanza que tenía de que la señorita Birdseye celebrara otra de sus deliciosas reuniones. En relación a este punto explicó que no era por querer nuevamente presentar a su hija ante una asamblea, sino solo porque en tales ocasiones se producía un valioso intercambio de ideas estimulantes, un contacto entre mente y mente. Si Verena podía contribuir con algo sugestivo a la resolución de los problemas sociales, ya se presentaría la ocasión, esa era parte de su credo. Ellos no tenían ninguna prisa para presentarse y forzar las puertas; cuando se les necesitara entonces llegaría la hora; si no se les necesitaba se quedarían en su sitio y dejarían el paso abierto a los elegidos. Si eran llamados, ya se les haría saber; y si no lo eran, seguirían tan unidos como siempre lo habían estado. Tarrant era muy aficionado a hablar por alternativas, y mencionó varias más; no era su culpa si sus oyentes no lo consideraban imparcial. No tenían demasiado, como bien podía ver la señorita Chancellor; ella podía darse cuenta por su tenor de vida que no nadaban en medio de la abundancia; pero tenían fe en que, tanto si uno levantaba la voz como si trabajaba en silencio, resolvería las mayores dificultades; y ellos tenían también una experiencia muy amplia en tales problemas. Tarrant hablaba como si la familia entera estuviera preparada para enfrentarse a esos problemas con moderación y serenidad. Cada vez que se dirigía a Olive decía «señora», y a esta el aire nunca le había parecido tan lleno del sonido de su propio nombre. Lo tenía siempre en el oído, excepto cuando la señora Tarrant y Verena

conversaban en prolongados y alegres apartes; aunque hablaran de ella, se conformaban con usar solo el pronombre. Olive deseaba formarse un juicio sobre el doctor Tarrant (no es que creyera que él hubiera obtenido honradamente ese título) para tener una idea precisa. Ya lo había logrado, y pensaba que esa clase de hombres era capaz de renunciar a cualquier derecho sobre una hija si les ofrecían unos diez mil dólares, y permanecer, tanto él como su mujer, lejos de ella todo el tiempo. Es posible que con su siniestra sonrisa respondiera: «Bueno, que sean veinte mil, al contado, y el trato está hecho». La imagen de este contrato, como una de las posibilidades para el futuro, se delineó en la mente de Olive entre las reflexiones morales que se hizo esa tarde. Parecía surgir del lugar mismo, de la desnudez de aquel provisional cobijo de los Tarrant, una cabaña de madera, con un patio sin cultivar al frente, una plaza desierta, que parecía exponerlos más que protegerlos, frente a una calle no pavimentada, en que la acera estaba formada por tablones. Aquellas tablas estaban colocadas sobre el hielo, o en el fango de los deshielos según las variaciones del tiempo, y el peatón que se aventuraba a caminar sobre ellas lo hacía con el aliento suspendido, como quien marcha sobre una cuerda floja. La casa no poseía nada digno de elogio; nada que cautivara los sentidos de Olive fuera del mal olor de queroseno; tenía solo conciencia de estar sentada sobre algo, un objeto que chirriaba y se movía, y de que la mesa estaba cubierta por un mantel de tela de colores brillantes.

En lo referente a la transacción pecuniaria con Selah, no sabía cómo se le había ocurrido, pues tenía la convicción de que Verena nunca consentiría en abandonar a sus padres. Olive estaba segura de que nunca les daría la espalda, de que siempre se sentiría ligada a ellos. La habría despreciado en el caso de adoptar una conducta distinta; sin embargo, no comprendía por qué, cuando se trataba de padres tan desastrosos, no se podían anular las leyes naturales. Esta pregunta, sin embargo, la hizo volver al perpetuo enigma, al misterio que había rondado su mente durante horas enteras: el misterio que encerraba que semejantes individuos pudieran ser los progenitores de Verena. Se había explicado este fenómeno, como nos explicamos todas las cosas excepcionales, considerándolo, como dirían los franceses, algo milagroso. Había llegado a considerar a la joven como la maravilla entre las maravillas, y por eso consideraba que ningún origen humano, aunque fuese el mejor posible, lograba explicar

suficientemente ese prodigio. Que el que hubiera nacido de Selah y su mujer era un capricho exquisito de la fuerza creadora; y que en ese caso algunas sombras más o menos inexplicables dejaban de tener importancia. Es bien sabido que algunas grandes bellezas, grandes genios, grandes personajes surgen en lugares y en épocas insólitos, dejando a los espectadores sorprendidos la tarea de adaptarlos, o de buscar sus orígenes en lejanos antepasados o haciéndolos derivar de la generosidad divina, más que de sus feos o estúpidos progenitores. De cualquier modo eran fenómenos imprevisibles, como Selah hubiese dicho. A los ojos de Olive, Verena era el modelo, el típico ejemplo de un «ser dotado»; sus cualidades no habían sido adquiridas ni compradas; eran como un extraordinario regalo de cumpleaños, dejado a la puerta por un mensajero misterioso, para disfrutar de él siempre como si se tratara de un legado inextinguible, y poder divertirse con la oscuridad de su procedencia. Sus cualidades estaban en estado bruto todavía —felizmente para Olive, que se había prometido cultivarlas y afinarlas—, pero eran tan espontáneas como las flores y los frutos, como las lenguas del fuego o el surtidor de una fuente. Verena, según su reflexiva amiga, tenía disposiciones artísticas, esa naturaleza en la cual todas las formas encantadoras surgen fácil y naturalmente. Era necesario hacer un esfuerzo al principio para imaginarse a un artista tan poco cultivado, tan desperdiciado, tan carente de conocimientos; pero asimismo también era necesario hacer un esfuerzo para imaginar la existencia de individuos como los Tarrant, y una vida tan colmada de cosas desagradables como había sido la de ellos. Solo una criatura exquisita había logrado no sucumbir ante semejantes influencias, solo una joven dotada de alguna luz interior, una centella divina de buen gusto. Existían personas como esa, creadas directamente por la mano del Omnipotente; desde luego no era común encontrarlas, pero su existencia era tan innegable como benéfica.

La conversación de Tarrant sobre su hija, sus proyectos, su entusiasmo, le resultaron terriblemente penosos a Olive; le producían la misma angustiosa impresión que sintió cuando lo había visto poner las manos sobre su hija para hacerla hablar. El hecho de que tuviera que inmiscuirse de alguna manera en el ejercicio de las facultades de la joven constituiría un grave perjuicio para la causa, y Olive estaba ya determinada a que en el futuro Verena prescindiera de su cooperación. La joven le había confesado

prácticamente que se prestaba a ello porque eso le producía a él una gran satisfacción, y que cualquier otra cosa podía provocar los mismos resultados, cualquier cosa que la hiciera sentirse tranquila antes de comenzar a «revelarse». Olive consideraba que ella podía producirle esa tranquilidad, aunque, por supuesto, nunca había sido ese el efecto que le causara a nadie; subiría al estrado con Verena si era necesario y pondría sus manos sobre la cabeza de la joven. ¿Cómo era posible que en el mundo un hado perverso hubiera decretado que Tarrant tuviera que estar inmiscuido en los asuntos de la Mujer, como si esta deseara su ayuda para alcanzar la meta deseada? Él, un charlatán de la peor, de la más mezquina, de la más barata especie, sin el talento, la brillantez ni el prestigio siquiera necesarios algunas veces para cubrir con un manto de oropel la propia mediocridad. Era evidente que también el señor Pardon se interesaba en tales asuntos, pero había algo en su aspecto que parecía indicar que su simpatía no resultaría peligrosa. Advirtió que aquel joven se sentía en casa de los Tarrant perfectamente cómodo, que actuaba con entera libertad, y reflexionó sobre que, aunque a menudo Verena le había hablado de él, nunca le había dado la idea de que tuviera tanta intimidad con la familia. Lo que le había dicho, sobre todo, era que algunas veces la acompañaba al teatro. Eso, hasta cierto punto, Olive podía comprenderlo. Ella misma había atravesado por una fase semejante (algún tiempo después de la muerte de su padre —su madre lo había precedido—, cuando compró la pequeña casa de Charles Street y comenzó a vivir sola) en la que solía hacerse acompañar por caballeros a lugares respetables de asueto. Por eso no le escandalizó la idea de que Verena corriera semejantes aventuras, ya que, de acuerdo con su propia experiencia, nada podía resultar menos aventurado. El recuerdo que guardaba de aquellas excursiones era el de algo solemne y edificante: el solícito interés que sus acompañantes mostraban en entretenerla (en muy pocas ocasiones los jóvenes bostonianos parecieron tomarse mayores libertades); el placer de encontrarse con otras amigas sentadas cerca de ella, que con toda seguridad conocían a sus compañeros; las serias discusiones en los entreactos sobre la conducta de los personajes de la obra, y el discurso final con que, en el umbral de la puerta de su casa, ella le agradecía al joven su cortesía: «Le estoy muy agradecida por esta agradable velada». Advertía siempre que se despedía de una manera demasiado formal; sus labios se endurecían cuando hablaba. Pero todo el

asunto era siempre de lo más formal; esto resultaba evidente hasta para el escaso sentido del humor de Olive. No tenía la solemnidad religiosa de cuando asistía a los servicios vespertinos de King's Chapel, pero se parecía bastante. Naturalmente no todas las señoritas se comportaban así; había familias que consideraban tal costumbre con desagrado. Pero esto ocurría cuando las jóvenes observaban una conducta ligera. Como regla general no era indecoroso hacer esas salidas; eran una muestra de cultura y de gustos sobrios. Todo esto hacía que Verena le pareciera inocente, habiendo estado su vida expuesta a peligros mucho peores; pero en la mente de Olive tales hábitos se relacionaban con otro peligro, cuya sombra nunca desaparecía: la posibilidad de que la muchacha se embarcara con algún joven interesante en una aventura que durara bastante más que una noche. En pocas palabras, estaba aterrorizada ante la idea de que Verena pudiera casarse, un destino que ella no estaba de ninguna manera dispuesta a aceptar; y eso hacía que mirara con sospechas cualquier amistad masculina que tuviera la joven.

El señor Pardon no era el único. Olive sabía que podía citar como ejemplo de estas amistades a dos estudiantes de derecho de Harvard, quienes hicieron su aparición después del té en aquella misma ocasión. Mientras estaban sentados allí, Olive se preguntó si Verena no le habría ocultado algo; si, después de todo, no fuera ella también, como tantas muchachas de Cambridge, la *belle* de algún colegio, el objeto de frecuentes visitas de parte de los estudiantes. Era natural que en la sede de una gran universidad hubiese muchachas de ese tipo, que se dejaban cortejar por los estudiantes todo el tiempo, pero no quería que Verena se convirtiera en una de ellas. Había algunas que recibían a los estudiantes de doctorado y a los de los últimos años de carrera; otras que, en cambio, se divertían con los más jóvenes. Algunas señoritas tenían preferencia por determinadas profesiones, y había también un grupo que mantenía relaciones muy estrechas con los jóvenes que estudiaban en el Seminario de la Iglesia Unitaria, en aquella especie de barraca al final de la Avenida de la Divinidad. La llegada de las nuevas visitas puso en gran agitación a la señora Tarrant; pero después de haber cambiado dos o tres veces de asiento y haber logrado que todos los demás hicieran lo mismo, la compañía formó un círculo, roto de vez en cuando por los inquietos movimientos de su marido, el que, a falta de un argumento que discutir, se colocaba en diferentes sitios en actitud de escuchar, asintiendo gravemente con la cabeza y mirando

la alfombra con un aire de extraordinaria atención. La señora Tarrant interrogó a los dos estudiantes de derecho sobre sus estudios, y si tenían intenciones de seguirlos seriamente; dijo que consideraba que algunas leyes eran muy injustas, y que esperaba que ellos se decidieran a tratar de modificarlas. Ella misma había sido víctima de la ley después de la muerte de su padre; no había recibido ni la mitad de los bienes que debía haber recibido si las leyes que regían la sociedad fueran justas. Pensaba que debían servir al bien público y no a determinados intereses privados. Le pareció que en la práctica tendían a mantener oprimidos a quienes ya eran oprimidos, y hacer difícil la vida de la gente sencilla. A veces le parecía un verdadero milagro haber logrado desarrollar sus facultades en medio de tantas dificultades; pero eso era una prueba de que la libertad existe en todas partes, si uno se decidía a buscarla.

Los dos jóvenes estaban de un humor excelente; y recibieron estas declaraciones con tono alegre, aunque formalmente cortés, cuyo espíritu no se le escapó a Olive. Era natural que conversaran más con Verena que con la madre; y en un momento en que se entretenían con ella, la señora Tarrant le explicó quiénes eran y cómo uno de ellos, el más pequeño, que no era un dechado de apostura, había llevado al otro, su amigo íntimo, para presentarlo. Este amigo era el señor Burrage, un joven muy elegante de Nueva York que frecuentaba muchos círculos de Boston («No me cabe duda que usted conoce alguno de esos lugares», dijo la señora Tarrant); su familia era muy rica.

—Bueno, conoce a muchas personas en esos ambientes —continuó la señora Tarrant —, pero se siente insatisfecho, nunca había conocido a nadie como nosotros. Le dijo al señor Gracie (el pequeñito) que sentía que era un deber; parece que no podía eximirse de hacerlo. Así que, por supuesto, le dijimos al señor Gracie que lo trajera. Espero que algún provecho obtendrá visitándonos. Se ha dicho que estaba comprometido con la señorita Winkworth; no me cabe duda que usted sabe a quién me refiero. Pero el señor Gracie dice que no la ha visto más de dos veces. Ese es el modo en que los rumores vuelan en esos ambientes, me imagino. Cualquiera que sea nuestra posición me alegro de no frecuentar aquel mundo. El señor Gracie es diferente; es feo hasta más no poder, pero creo que muy instruido. ¿No lo encuentra feo? Oh, ¿cómo no va a saberlo usted? Bueno, supongo que no le interesa a usted, debe ver a tantos caballeros. Pero yo debo confesarle que cuando veo a un joven como ese lo defino como terriblemente feo.

Escuché que el doctor Tarrant comentó lo mismo la última vez que el joven nos visitó. No quiero decir que los más feos no puedan ser los mejores. Bueno, no tenía idea de que íbamos a tener una pequeña fiesta cuando la invité. Me pregunto si no sería mejor que Verena ofreciera un poco de pastel. Hemos descubierto que a los estudiantes les gusta mucho.

Este encargo le fue finalmente encomendado a Selah, quien, después de una ausencia considerable, reapareció con un plato de pastas, que fue ofreciendo a todos los miembros de la reunión. Olive vio que Verena prodigaba sus sonrisas al señor Gracie y al señor Burrage; la conversación entre ellos parecía muy animada, y en especial el último caballero mencionado reía de modo muy elogioso. Al observar a aquel grupo se hubiese podido imaginar que la vocación de Verena era la de sonreír y de conversar con sus jóvenes admiradores; esto, digámoslo con claridad, lo hubiera podido imaginar una persona que no estuviera exactamente segura de lo contrario, como Olive, quien tenía buenas razones para estar convencida de que Verena era «un ser dotado» enviado a este mundo con fines muy diferentes, y que hacer pasar el tiempo agradablemente a dos jóvenes ociosos es el último deber en que se espera que piense alguien que tiene la fortuna de poseer el talento necesario para representar una causa. Olive trató de sentirse contenta de que su amiga tuviera unas condiciones naturales tan ricas como para ser una mujer encantadora, sin segundos fines; pensaba que Verena no era de ninguna manera coqueta, sino que era encantadora y lograba fascinar a todo el mundo, que tenía una sonrisa bella, que se dirigía imparcialmente a todo el mundo, hombres y mujeres, por igual. Podía Olive tener razón, pero debe confiarse al lector que en realidad ella nunca sabía, con sus capacidades de percepción, si Verena era coqueta o no. Por supuesto la joven no se lo diría (en el caso de saberlo, cosa improbable), y Olive, carente de esa cualidad, no tenía otro medio que pudiera socorrerla para medir en otra mujer ese innato y sutil deseo de agradar. Ella podía ver la diferencia existente entre el señor Gracie y el señor Burrage; y el hecho de que le fastidiara el empeño de la señora Tarrant en hacérsela notar era quizá la prueba. Era un curioso incidente en su celo por la regeneración de su sexo el que las cosas masculinas le resultaran más fácilmente comprensibles. El señor Burrage era lo que se dice un joven apuesto, con un rostro sonriente e inteligente; vestía con cuidada elegancia, y tenía el aire de pertenecer

al «mejor mundo»; un joven de mundo dando sus primeros pasos, curioso por experimentar nuevas sensaciones, que tenía tal vez la pasta de un diletante. Sin duda debía de ser un joven ambicioso y, deseoso de demostrarse a sí mismo que apreciaba el valor en sus formas más bajas, había hecho amistad con una personalidad más ruda, pero a la vez más aguda, un auténtico hijo de Nueva Inglaterra, quien tenía una cabeza más dura que la suya y un humor en realidad más cínico, y quien, habiendo conocido antes a los Tarrant, había deseado mostrárselos como algo nativo y curioso, y posiblemente hasta fascinante. El señor Gracie era un hombre de baja estatura, con una cabeza enorme; usaba gafas; era descuidado en el vestir como un hombre de campo, y le gustaba decir, con sus feos labios, cosas agradables. Verena tenía respuestas adecuadas para muchas de ellas, y un hermoso color teñía su cara mientras hablaba. Olive podía ver que se comportaba tan bien como uno de aquellos caballeros le había anunciado al otro. La señorita Chancellor sabía las conversaciones que sostendrían entre sí como si las estuviera oyendo: el señor Gracie habría prometido que provocaría una discusión para justificar la descripción que le había hecho de la muchacha y demostrarle que era la más asombrosa criatura de aquel grupo. Al marcharse harían bromas sobre ella, encenderían sus cigarros y durante varios días ellas sería el tema de sus conversaciones, que estarían llenas de citas de «la muchacha de los derechos de la mujer».

Era sorprendente descubrir de cuántos modos podían resultar antipáticos los hombres; estos dos eran muy distintos de Basil Ransom, y eran a la vez distintos entre sí, y sin embargo los modales de cada uno constituían un insulto a su feminidad. Lo peor del caso era que Verena no parecía advertir el ultraje, y por consiguiente no sentía ninguna antipatía hacia ellos. Había tantas cosas que todavía no había aprendido a detestar, a pesar de los sinceros esfuerzos de su amiga por enseñárselas. Tenía muy clara la idea (eso era lo sorprendente) de la crueldad de los hombres, de la inmemorial injusticia masculina; pero era una idea abstracta, platónica, y, en consecuencia, no los detestaba. ¿Qué sentido tenía entonces poseer aquella visión profunda e inspirada de la historia de su sexo (algo, le había dicho, exactamente igual a la visión sobrenatural que Juana de Arco había tenido de la situación de Francia) si no ponía en práctica aquellos principios y se comportaba como una muchacha cualquiera, convencional y pusilánime?

Había sido en vano haberle dicho aquel día famoso de su primer encuentro que debía aprender a renunciar a todo; ¿parecía en ese momento una joven que ha renunciado a algo? Supongamos que aquel brillante y sonriente Burrage, con sus cadenas y anillos y zapatos brillantes, se enamorara de ella y tratara de persuadirla, con sus grandes riquezas, de que renunciara a otras cosas, que renunciara por ejemplo a su santa causa y se fuera con él a Nueva York, y viviera allí como su mujer, parcialmente vejada, parcialmente tiranizada, en la habitual manera de los Burrage. Esta perspectiva le producía tan poco alivio a la señorita Chancellor como preocupación le daba el recuerdo de aquella frase desenvuelta de Verena sobre su preferencia por «la unión libre». Se había tratado de una afirmación hecha a la ligera: ni siquiera sabía qué quería decir con eso. Aunque había crecido entre gente que aceptaba toda clase de extrañas iniquidades, conservaba la inocencia de la joven americana, esa inocencia excepcional pues había sobrevivido a la abolición de muros y cerrojos; y de los varios comentarios que Verena había hecho, aquella asombrosa observación era la mejor prueba. De cualquier manera, implicaba que las uniones de cualquier clase recibían su aprobación, y que no excluía los peligros que podían surgir de sus encuentros con jóvenes en busca de sensaciones nuevas.

XVI

El señor Pardon, como Olive observó, se mantenía un poco al margen de aquella conversación; pero tampoco era una persona que se dejara desanimar fácilmente. Se sentó al lado de la señorita Chancellor y comenzó a tratar un tema literario; le preguntó si seguía alguna de las novelas que se publicaban en las revistas. Cuando le comunicó que jamás se había interesado en nada del género, él emprendió una defensa del sistema de folletines, y ella le recordó al instante que nunca lo había atacado. Pardon no se desanimó por esa réplica, y saltó volublemente al problema de Mount Desert; la conversación, cualquiera que fuese el tema, constituía al parecer una necesidad de su naturaleza. Hablaba con gran rapidez y en tono bajo, con palabras y frases imperfectamente pronunciadas: había una cierta monotonía no del todo desagradable en su timbre, y abundaba en exclamaciones como «¡Santo cielo!» y «¡Dios nos ampare!», no frecuentes en un sexo propenso a las interjecciones blasfemas. Sus rasgos eran pequeños y delicados, extraordinariamente puros; bellos ojos, un par de bigotes que a menudo se acariciaba con aire juvenil muy en contraste con sus sienes grises y con el aire de libertad y de familiaridad con que hablaba de su carrera de periodista. Sus amigos sabían que, a pesar de su delicadeza y de su voz suave, era un hombre activo; su aspecto se podía conciliar perfectamente con una buena dosis de iniciativa literaria. Es necesario explicar que la mayor parte de ellos le daban a esta idea el mismo sentido de Selah Tarrant: una cierta familiaridad con los periódicos, el cultivo del gran arte de la publicidad. Para este ingenioso hijo de su siglo toda distinción entre la persona y el artista había cesado de existir; el escritor era una persona, y la persona, alimento para los periodistas, y todas las cosas y las personas convergían en ese mismo asunto. Para él todas las cosas se referían a la prensa, y la prensa significaba sencillamente un

reportaje infinito, rapidez en la información, abusiva cuando era necesario, y aun cuando no lo era, sobre sus conciudadanos. Constantemente se inmiscuía en sus asuntos privados, en su aspecto personal, con la mejor conciencia del mundo. Su fe, nuevamente, era la fe de Selah Tarrant: aparecer en los periódicos era la mayor felicidad, y poner en duda las condiciones de ese privilegio resultaría fastidioso. Era un *enfant de la balle*, como dicen los franceses; había comenzado su carrera a los catorce años de edad, recorriendo los hoteles para recoger sus flores en los grandes y untuosos libros de registro que yacen sobre los mostradores de mármol, y podía legítimamente jactarse de haber contribuido, con su pequeño grano de arena, en beneficio de una vigilante opinión pública, orgullo de un estado democrático, a impedir al ciudadano americano que se lanzara a viajes clandestinos. A partir de entonces había ascendido otros escalones de la misma escalera; era el más brillante entrevistador de la prensa de Boston. Había triunfado sobre todo con sus entrevistas a las damas; había confesado en su cuaderno de taquigrafía a muchas de las más célebres mujeres de la época —algunas de estas hijas de la fama eran muy voluminosas— y se le atribuía un notable método de insinuación para aproximarse a las *prime donne* y las actrices a la mañana siguiente de su llegada y a veces en la misma noche, mientras el equipaje yacía sin desempacar. Tenía solo veintiocho años, y con su cabellera blanca era un joven del todo moderno; no se planteaba la posibilidad de no aprovecharse de todas las conveniencias modernas. Consideraba la misión del hombre en este mundo como un perpetuo envío de telegramas; para él todas las cosas poseían el mismo valor, no tenía ningún sentido de las proporciones ni de las cualidades; solo las últimas novedades lograban crear en su mente un sentimiento respetuoso. Era objeto de la admiración más grande por parte de Selah Tarrant, quien creía que era dueño de todos los secretos del éxito, y quien, cuando la señora Tarrant comentaba (lo había hecho ya más de una vez) que creía que el señor Pardon trataba de hacerle la corte a Verena, declaró que, si era así, era uno de los pocos jóvenes con quien le gustaría que Verena uniera su destino, uno de los pocos que recibirían toda su aprobación para cortejarla. Tarrant estaba convencido de que si Matthias Pardon solicitaba a Verena en matrimonio sería con la idea de hacer de ella una figura pública, y las ventajas para la joven de tener un marido que era a la vez reportero, entrevistador, agente publicitario, que tenía influencia en

todos los principales diarios, que escribiría sobre ella y la lanzaría por así decirlo científicamente, eran tan obviamente atractivas que ni siquiera vale la pena insistir en ellas. Matthias no tenía una gran opinión de Tarrant; lo consideraba una personalidad de segunda categoría, un defensor de causas perdidas. Estaba convencido de amar a Verena, pero su pasión no conocía los celos; es más, incluía una disposición a compartir el objeto de su afecto con el pueblo americano.

Matthias Pardon conversó durante un rato con Olive sobre Mount Desert, le dijo que en sus reportajes había descrito a los huéspedes de los varios hoteles de la isla, pero observó que, sin embargo, un corresponsal sufría en la actualidad de la competencia de las «damas escritoras»; los artículos que ellas escribían algunas veces encontraban mayor aceptación en los periódicos. Pensaba que le agradaría saber esa noticia, ya que estaba enterado de su interés en que las mujeres se abrieran campo en el mundo moderno. No cabía duda que eran unas corresponsales de primera clase; sabían presentar siempre algo brillante al lector; era difícil que a sus ojos escapara una cosa de importancia, y era necesario ser muy hábil para llegar a un lugar antes que ellas. Por supuesto a veces eran un poco verborreicas, pero ese era el estilo que parecía gozar hoy día de mayor aprecio popular; su defecto era que no escribían sino sobre lo que sabían que podía interesar a las mujeres. Desde luego era consciente de que existían millones de damas lectoras, pero él se enorgullecía de no dirigirse exclusivamente a un gineceo, sino que trataba de encontrar algo que interesara a todos los lectores. Cuando uno leía la colaboración de una dama ya sabía desde el principio de qué trataría. En cambio, lo que él trataba de obtener era que nadie tuviera la menor idea al iniciar la lectura, en fin, presentar algo que lo hiciera saltar a uno de la silla. El señor Pardon no era más presuntuoso, ni menos, de lo que es natural cuando la juventud y el éxito se dan la mano, y era natural que no percibiera cuál era el estado de ánimo con que lo escuchaba la señorita Chancellor. Como sabía que era una mujer culta su deseo era simplemente proporcionarle el alimento que ella podía esperar. Olive lo juzgaba como una persona de calidad muy inferior; había oído decir que era extraordinariamente brillante, pero debía tratarse de un error; no podía haber ningún peligro para Verena de parte de un hombre que, de las grandes tendencias de su tiempo, no tenía sino una vislumbre superficial, y que las confundía con meros rumores mundanos. Además, lo

encontraba menos que medianamente culto, y estaba convencida, o al menos tenía una esperanza, de que en Verena se estaba desarrollando (bajo su dirección) un proceso educativo que le permitiría descubrir todo eso por su cuenta. Olive estaba constantemente en lucha con la ligereza de opiniones, la mundanidad y otros prejuicios de su época; muchos de ellos le parecían tan banales que llegaban a la categoría de imbecilidad, y sin embargo a algunas personas les hacían perder todas las medidas y los modelos, las hacían emitir superlativos absurdos mientras se complacían en dejarse engañar. Su época le parecía decadente y desmoralizada, y, en mi opinión, ella esperaba que la influencia del gran elemento femenino la hiciera sentir y hablar con más energía.

—Es para mí un privilegio escucharles conversar —le dijo la señora Tarrant—; esto es lo que yo llamo una conversación verdadera. No es frecuente encontrar algo tan auténtico, me hace sentir deseos de unirme a discutir con ustedes. Me era difícil saber a quién debía escuchar. Verena parece estar pasando un rato tan agradable con aquellos caballeros. Me he pasado la tarde oyendo a un grupo y al otro; tengo la impresión de que no puedo abarcarlo todo. Tal vez debería prestar un poco más de atención al señor Burrage; no me gustaría que pensara que no somos tan hospitalarios como la gente de Nueva York.

Así que decidió acercarse al trío que estaba en el otro extremo del salón, pues había percibido (y esperaba que la señorita Chancellor no se hubiese dado cuenta) que Verena trataba de persuadir a uno de sus compañeros a que fueran y conversaran con su querida amiga, y que aquellos inescrupulosos jóvenes, después de haberle lanzado una mirada por encima del hombro, parecían quererse excusar, arguyendo que no había sido aquel el objeto de su visita. Selah volvió a pasear por la sala con su repertorio de pasteles, y el señor Pardon comenzó a hablarle a Olive sobre Verena, para decirle que no lograba manifestarle todo lo que pensaba sobre el interés que había mostrado por ella. Olive no podía imaginarse por qué él debía decir o sentir algo al respecto y le respondió con respuestas breves y tajantes, mientras que el pobre joven, ignorante de haber caído en desgracia, comentaba que él esperaba que no fuera a ejercer ninguna influencia que pudiera impedirle a la señorita Tarrant ocupar el sitio que le correspondía. Pensaba que se estaba retardando su aparición; quería verla ya en las

primeras filas, quería ver su nombre impreso en carteles y su retrato en las vitrinas de las tiendas. No era posible discutir su genialidad, y ya era hora de que asumiera el papel que le correspondía. Era una joven con encanto, y en aquellos días había una necesidad de eso en la lucha por las nuevas ideas. Eran muchas las que habían fracasado por falta de ese encanto. Era necesario que ella saliera a la palestra; debía llegar a lo más alto. Se necesitaba una acción decidida. No entendía qué era lo que esperaban. No quería suponer que esperasen a que cumpliera los cincuenta años; ya había bastantes viejas en el frente de batalla. Sabía que la señorita Chancellor apreciaba la ventaja de su juventud, ya que la misma Verena se lo había dicho. Su padre era un hombre perezoso, y el invierno estaba pasando. El señor Pardon llegó al extremo de decir que si el doctor Tarrant no se apresuraba a hacer algo, él personalmente se ocuparía de aquel asunto. Al mismo tiempo expresó la esperanza de que Olive no fuera de la opinión de que Verena se mantuviera marginada y la influyera en ese sentido; esperaba que no lo juzgara demasiado insistente. Sabía que era un cargo que a menudo se aducía contra los periodistas: que a menudo transgredían los límites. Lo que sucedía era que le desagradaba pensar que las personas que estaban por razones naturales más cerca de Verena no supieran actuar a tiempo. Sabía que había aparecido en dos o tres veladas después de la reunión en casa de la señorita Birdseye, y también de las magníficas ocasiones que se le habían presentado en casa de la señorita Chancellor, donde muchas de las principales familias de la ciudad habían sido invitadas para conocerla. (Esta era una alusión a una pequeña comida que Olive había ofrecido a sus amigos, en la cual Verena había hablado ante una docena de viejas matronas y solteronas, seleccionadas por su huésped con infinita prudencia y escrúpulos morales; un reportaje sobre esa reunión, firmado posiblemente por el joven Matthias, que por supuesto no había estado presente, apareció con extraordinaria rapidez en un periódico vespertino.) Todo eso estaba muy bien, pero él quería algo en otra escala, algo tan grandioso que sacudiera a la población entera. Luego, bajando un poco la voz, mencionó cuál era su proyecto: una conferencia en el Music Hall, a cincuenta centavos el billete; sin el padre, solo con los propios recursos de la joven. Bajó la voz aún más y le reveló a la señorita Chancellor su más secreto propósito, asegurándose antes de que Selah no estaba en la sala, y que la señora Tarrant le preguntaba en ese momento al

señor Burrage si había visitado ya lo suficientemente la región. La verdad era que la señorita Verena deseaba «deshacerse de» su padre; estaba harta de que él la manejara de aquel modo antes de cada presentación; lo que no añadía ningún atractivo al espectáculo. El señor Pardon tenía la esperanza de que la señorita Chancellor estuviese de acuerdo con él en eso, y fue necesario un gran esfuerzo mental por parte de Olive, tan mínimo era su deseo de actuar en concierto con el señor Pardon, para admitirse a sí misma que así era. Ella le preguntó, con tono enteramente frío —había perdido toda la timidez—, si estaba en verdad interesado en el mejoramiento de la situación de la mujer. La pregunta le pareció al joven tan abrupta como inconsecuente, como si viniera desde una altura con la que no estuviera acostumbrado a entrar en contacto. Acostumbrado como estaba a la rapidez de respuestas, tuvo solo un momento de incertidumbre antes de responder:

—Oh, no hay nada que yo no esté dispuesto a hacer por las mujeres. ¡Deme tan solo una oportunidad y lo verá!

Olive permaneció un momento en silencio.

—Quiero decir… —añadió—, quiero saber si siente usted simpatía por nuestro sexo, o se trata de un interés especial en la señorita Tarrant.

—Bueno, la simpatía es la simpatía… es todo lo que puedo decirle. La tengo por la señorita Verena y por todas las demás, excepción hecha de las damas corresponsales —añadió el joven, con una jocosidad que, como pronto advirtió, era un desperdicio con la amiga de Verena. Tampoco tuvo más éxito cuando añadió—: También la tengo por usted, señorita Chancellor.

Olive se puso de pie, aunque con dudas; quería marcharse, y sin embargo no podía dejar que explotaran a Verena, como sintió que ocurriría, después de su partida, como ya habían comenzado a hacerlo aquellos dos ofensivos jóvenes. Tenía también la extraña sensación de que su amiga la había abandonado durante la última media hora, no se había ocupado de ella, había colocado una barrera entre ellas… una barrera de amplias espaldas masculinas y risas que denotaban vulgaridad, de miradas alegres dirigidas en su dirección, que parecían desconectarla más con lo que ocurría en aquella parte de la sala que invitarla a formar parte del grupo. Verena intuyó que la señorita Chancellor no se sentía a gusto cuando había otros jóvenes alegres dirigiendo la

escena, el descubrimiento no requería una gran penetración; pero la pobre muchacha debió de pensar que podía ser menos agradable para Olive el que se advirtiera que se sentía inadaptada en semejante compañía e imponérsela además. Los peores temores de la señorita Chancellor se veían justificados ahora ante los gritos de la señora Tarrant pidiéndole que no se fuera, ya que el señor Burrage y el señor Gracie estaban tratando de persuadir a Verena de que les diera una muestra de su inspiración, y ella estaba segura de que su hija aceptaría de inmediato si la señorita Chancellor le pedía que se tranquilizara. Solo ella podía lograrlo. El señor Gracie y el señor Burrage la habían excitado al grado de que temía que la prueba resultara mediocre. Todo el grupo se había puesto de pie, y Verena se dirigió a Olive con los brazos extendidos y su mirada inocente y luminosa.

—Sé que todos ustedes quieren que hable; trataré de decir unas cuantas palabras. Pero me temo que no haya suficiente público; no estoy acostumbrada a hablar ante tan escasa concurrencia.

—De haberlo sabido habríamos traído a algunos amigos; hubieran estado encantados de venir si les hubiésemos dado la oportunidad —dijo el señor Burrage—. En toda la universidad existe un enorme deseo de poder escucharla, y no hay un público mejor dispuesto que el público masculino de Harvard. Gracie y yo somos solamente dos, pero Gracie representa a todo un público y estoy seguro de que él podrá decir lo mismo de mí. —El joven pronunció estas palabras con alegre desenvoltura, sonriéndole a Verena, y también un poco a Olive, con el aire de quien es unánimemente reconocido como autor de frases agudas.

—El señor Burrage escucha aún mejor de lo que habla —declaró su compañero—. Tenemos la costumbre de escuchar conferencias, ya usted sabe. Y asistir a una conferencia suya constituiría para nosotros un gran placer. Estamos hundidos en la ignorancia y los prejuicios.

—¡Ah, mis prejuicios! —lo interrumpió Barrage—. ¡Si pudiese usted verlos! Le puedo asegurar que son en realidad monstruosos.

—¡Combátaselos hasta que no quede ni el recuerdo de ellos! —exclamó Matthias Pardon—. Si quiere usted hablar en la Universidad de Harvard esta es una buena ocasión. Estos caballeros propagarán la noticia.

—No me imagino qué cosa puede gustarles —dijo Verena, mirando aún fijamente a Olive.

—Estoy segura de que a la señorita Chancellor le gusta todo lo que hay aquí —comentó la señora Tarrant con noble confianza.

Selah había vuelto a aparecer: su figura digna y hierática estaba enmarcada por la puerta.

—¿Desean que trate de insuflarle un poco de inspiración? —preguntó, mirando al círculo de asistentes con tono alentador.

—Lo haré sola, si me lo permiten —dijo Verena—. Será una buena ocasión para tratar de hacerlo sin mi padre.

—¿No querrás insinuar que no quieres que te asista? —exclamó consternada la señora Tarrant.

—Ah, se lo ruego, queremos ver el programa completo, no omita usted ningún punto importante —imploró el señor Barrage.

—Mi único interés es el de animarla —dijo Selah, defendiendo su integridad—. Me retiraría si no creyera que de este modo le transmito alguna vitalidad. No tengo el menor deseo de atraer la atención sobre mis humildes facultades.

Esta declaración parecía dirigida a la señorita Chancellor.

—Bueno, la inspiración será más auténtica si usted no la toca —le dijo Matthias Pardon—. Resultará más claro que proviene, bueno, de dondequiera que sea.

—Sí, nosotros no pretendemos saberlo —murmuró la señora Tarrant.

Esta breve discusión había hecho afluir la sangre al rostro de Olive; sabía que todos la estaban mirando —Verena más que los demás— y que esa era la ocasión para afirmar sus derechos de posesión sobre la muchacha. Y tal posibilidad era la causa de su turbación; además, le disgustaba ocupar un papel preeminente en tales circunstancias. Pero todo lo que estaban diciendo era absurdo y vulgar; el lugar parecía espeso con la atmósfera de la que deseaba liberar a Verena. Estaban tratando a la joven como si fuera un espectáculo, un entretenimiento social, y los dos jóvenes estudiantes se reían de ella desvergonzadamente. Ella no estaba destinada a eso, y Olive debía salvarla. Verena era tan ingenua que no podía defenderse por sí sola; era el único espíritu puro en medio de aquel odioso grupo.

—Me gustaría que te dirigieras a un público al que valiera la pena hablarle; que convencieras a personas serias y sinceras. —Olive era consciente del temblor de su voz—. Tu misión no es la de exhibirte como un pasatiempo frente a algunas personas, sino la de tocar el corazón de comunidades enteras, de naciones.

—Querida señora, estoy seguro de que la señorita Tarrant tocará mi corazón —objetó el señor Burrage con galantería.

—Bueno, no lo sé, pero me parece que los considera como unos jóvenes ligeros —dijo la señora Tarrant con un suspiro.

Verena, olvidándose un momento de las preocupaciones de su amiga, se dirigió al señor Burrage con una sonrisa.

—No creo que tenga usted corazón, y si lo tiene no me preocuparía demasiado.

—No tiene usted idea de qué manera aumenta mi deseo de oírla hablar.

—Haz lo que quieras, querida —dijo Olive, casi inaudiblemente—. El coche debe de estar ya esperándome; de cualquier modo yo debo dejarles.

—Veo que no quieres que hable —dijo Verena, sorprendida—. Si quisieras te quedarías un poco más, ¿no es cierto?

—No sé lo que haría. ¡Ven conmigo un momento! —Olive hablaba con ferocidad.

—Por lo visto los jóvenes no saldrán de aquí siendo mejores de como han llegado —dijo Matthias Pardon.

—Será mejor que vengan por acá cualquier otra noche —sugirió tranquilamente Selah, pero con un doble sentido que el oído de Olive pudo percibir.

El señor Gracie parecía inclinarse a hacer las más vivas protestas.

—Bueno, señorita Tarrant, ¿quiere usted o no salvar el honor de la Universidad de Harvard? —preguntó con una mueca cómica.

—No sabía que ustedes fueran la Universidad de Harvard —le respondió Verena con igual tono humorístico.

—Me temo que esta velada les desilusionará si es que esperaban conocer más íntimamente nuestras ideas —dijo la señora Tarrant al señor Gracie con un aire de desolada simpatía, y luego dirigiéndose a Olive continuó—: Buenas noches, señorita Chancellor. Espero que haya traído un buen abrigo. Supongo que pensará que nos excedemos en esta casa. La mayor parte de nuestros amigos no ha tenido nada que

objetar al respecto. Cuidado; hay un agujero en el porche; me temo que el doctor Tarrant no se ha acordado de llamar al carpintero. Me parece que usted considera que nos entregamos demasiado a estas nuevas esperanzas. Bueno, hemos estado muy contentos de que haya venido a visitarnos; eso despierta un poco mi apetito de relaciones sociales. ¿Ha venido en coche? Yo los trineos no puedo soportarlos; me hacen sentirme mal.

Esta fue la respuesta de la anfitriona a la despedida muy seca de la señorita Chancellor, pronunciada mientras las tres damas se dirigían hacia la puerta de la casa. Olive había salido de la sala en una especie de ciega y desafiante marcha; pareció no advertir la presencia del resto del grupo. Cuando estaba tranquila se comportaba con una perfecta educación, pero cuando se agitaba era culpable de ciertos lapsos, los que, magnificados, volvían a su mente durante las largas noches de insomnio. Algunas veces le producían remordimientos, otras, una sensación de triunfo; en este último caso sentía no poder ser demasiado tajante a sangre fría, como era de justicia proceder. Tarrant quiso acompañarla por las escaleras y por el pequeño patio hasta su carruaje; le hizo notar que habían limpiado los tablones en su honor. Pero ella le rogó que la dejara sola, y casi lo empujó para que se retirara. Hizo salir en cambio a Verena a la fresca oscuridad, cerrando la puerta tras ella. Había un cielo espléndido, todo azul intenso y plata, una cintilante cúpula invernal, donde las estrellas eran como miles de puntos de hielo. El aire era silencioso y tajante, y la borrosa nieve tenía un aspecto cruel. Olive sabía ahora con toda precisión cuál era la promesa que esperaba de Verena; pero hacía demasiado frío; no podía hacerle permanecer allí con la cabeza descubierta más de un instante. Entretanto, en el salón, la señora Tarrant comentaba que la señorita Chancellor parecía no querer confiar a Verena ni a sus propios padres, y Selah daba a entender que con una invitación hecha en la debida forma, su hija se sentiría feliz de poder dirigir un discurso a toda la Universidad de Harvard. El señor Barrage y el señor Gracie respondieron que ellos podían invitarla allí mismo en nombre de toda la universidad; y Matthias Pardon pensó (y acertó) jubilosamente que aquello podría constituir una magnífica noticia. Pero añadió que primero deberían hablar con la señorita Chancellor; y de esto, por lo visto, estaba convencido todo el grupo.

—Puedo darme cuenta de que algo te ha enfadado —le dijo Verena a Olive, mientras las dos permanecían de pie a la luz de las estrellas—. Espero que no haya sido yo. ¿Qué he hecho?

—No estoy enojada… sino ansiosa. ¡Tengo tanto miedo de perderte! ¡Verena, no me abandones…! ¡No me abandones! —Olive hablaba en voz baja, apasionadamente.

—¿Fallarte? ¿De qué manera?

—Por supuesto que no podrás hacerlo, no podrás. Tu estrella está sobre ti. Pero no los escuches.

—¿A quiénes, Olive? ¿A mis padres?

—No, no me refiero a tus padres —respondió Olive secamente. Hizo una breve pausa, y luego añadió—: Tus padres no me interesan, ya antes te lo había dicho; pero ahora que los he visto, como ellos, como tú habías deseado, y no yo, vuelvo a decir que no me interesan. Debo repetirlo, Verena. Sería deshonesto de mi parte hacerte creer otra cosa.

—¡Qué dices, Olive Chancellor! —murmuró Verena, como si tratara, a pesar de la tristeza que aquella declaración le producía, de rendir justicia a la imparcialidad de su amiga.

—Sé que soy dura, tal vez sea cruel, pero debemos ser duras si queremos triunfar. No escuches a esos jóvenes que tratan de embrollarte y de mofarse de ti. No les interesas; no les interesamos. Les interesa solo divertirse y creen que pueden lograrlo por considerar que tienen el derecho del más fuerte. ¿El más fuerte? ¡Yo no estoy tan segura!

—Algunos de ellos se interesan mucho, o, en fin, se supone que se interesan mucho en nuestra causa —dijo Verena, con una sonrisa que en la oscuridad resultó de lo más ambiguo.

—Sí, siempre y cuando abandonemos todo. Una vez te pregunté si estabas dispuesta a renunciar a todo.

—¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Renunciar a ti?

—No, a abandonar a todas nuestras infortunadas hermanas, todas nuestras esperanzas y proyectos, todo lo que estimamos sagrado y digno de vivir por ello.

—Oh, Olive, no se proponen eso. —La sonrisa de Verena se hizo más clara, luego añadió—: ¡No exigen tanto!

—Bueno, entonces ve a hablar con ellos, canta para ellos, baila para ellos.

—Olive, eres cruel.

—Sí, lo soy. Pero prométeme una cosa y seré, oh, sí, la persona más dulce.

—¡Qué lugar más extraño para hacer promesas! —dijo Verena con un escalofrío, mirando a su alrededor en medio de la oscuridad.

—Sí, soy terrible, lo sé. Pero prométeme… —Y Olive atrajo hacia sí a la muchacha, tomándola con ambas manos, mientras la miraba con un aire suplicante y dudoso—: ¡Prométemelo! —repetía.

—¿Se trata de algo terrible?

—Prométeme no escuchar a ninguno de ellos, no dejarte nunca corromper…

En ese momento se volvió a abrir de nuevo la puerta de la casa, y la luz del vestíbulo se proyectó hacia el patio. Matthias Pardon apareció en el marco de la puerta, y luego aparecieron Tarrant y su mujer, con los otros dos huéspedes, para saber qué había podido detener a Verena afuera.

—Parece que ha comenzado a dar ahí fuera una especie de conferencia —dijo el señor Pardon—. Es preciso tener más cuidado, señoras, o de otra manera quedarán congeladas.

A Verena su madre le hizo notar que de esa manera podía encontrar la muerte, pero había oído pronunciar tajantemente, aunque en voz muy baja, las cinco últimas palabras de Olive, quien ahora la soltó bruscamente y recorrió a toda prisa el camino hacia el carruaje que la esperaba. Tarrant trató de seguir, entre el chirrido de las tablas, a la señorita Chancellor para ayudarla. Los otros hicieron entrar a Verena inmediatamente en la casa. «¡Prométeme que nunca te casarás!», esa era la frase que se repetía como un eco en su mente confusa y que siguió martilleándole el cerebro cuando el señor Burrage volvió a la carga, pidiéndole que al menos fijara una fecha para que ellos pudiesen escucharla. Sabía que esa súplica de Olive no debía tomarla por sorpresa; la había sentido ya en el aire. Si se lo hubiesen preguntado en cualquier otro momento habría respondido que suponía que a la señorita Chancellor no le gustaría que se casara. Pero la idea, expresada de la manera en que lo había hecho su amiga, adquiría una nueva

solemnidad y aquella rápida y violenta conversación tuvo por efecto ponerla nerviosa e impaciente, como si a sus ojos se hubiera presentado una fugaz vislumbre del futuro. Y era bastante terrible, aunque representara el destino que había personalmente elegido.

Cuando los dos jóvenes de la universidad renovaron insistentemente su petición, ella les preguntó, con una risa que los sorprendió, si acaso querían «embrollarla y mofarse de ella». Ellos se retiraron, asintiendo a la última afirmación de la señora Tarrant:

—Me temo que ustedes aún no han terminado de comprendernos.

Matthias Pardon permaneció todavía un rato más. El padre y la madre de Verena, expresando la más completa confianza de que él los excusara, lo dejaron en la sala y se fueron a acostar. Se quedó casi una hora y dijo ciertas frases que le hicieron pensar a Verena que tal vez él deseaba casarse con ella. Pero mientras lo escuchaba, con menos atención que de costumbre, se hizo la reflexión de que no había ninguna dificultad de hacerle la promesa a Olive, por lo menos en lo que a él concernía. Pardon era muy agradable, y tenía inmensos conocimientos sobre todas las cosas, y la sumergiría en medio de la vida. Pero, de cualquier manera, no deseaba casarse con él, y después de que se marchó vio que si se ponía a pensar no tenía deseos de casarse con nadie. De modo que, después de todo, resultaría fácil hacerle a Olive aquella promesa que tanto placer podía producirle.

XVII

La siguiente vez que Verena vio a Olive, le dijo que estaba dispuesta a hacerle la promesa que le había solicitado aquella noche; pero, para su gran sorpresa, la joven le respondió con una pregunta que intentaba frenar cualquier tipo de precipitación. La señorita Chancellor levantó un dedo admonitorio; tenía un aire de disuasión casi tan solemne como lo había sido su presión anterior; su apasionada impaciencia parecía haber dado lugar a otras consideraciones, había sido reemplazada por la resignación que produce una reflexión más madura. En este caso se teñía de un tinte de amargura difícilmente compatible con el temperamento de una joven que cultivaba el resplandor de una gran fe.

—¿Así que ahora no quieres ninguna promesa? —preguntó Verena—. ¡Pero, Olive, realmente eres voluble!

—Mi querida niña, eres tan joven, tan asombrosamente joven. Yo en cambio tengo mil años; he vivido generaciones, siglos enteros. Lo que sé lo sé por experiencia, tú lo sabes por obra de tu imaginación. Eso está de acuerdo con tu naturaleza de criatura fresca y luminosa. A menudo olvido las diferencias que nos separan, es decir, que eres todavía una niña, una niña destinada a realizar grandes cosas. La otra noche me olvidé de ello, pero después lo he recordado. Tienes que pasar por cierta fase, y sería un error de mi parte tratar de suprimirla. Ahora todo me resulta muy claro; puedo ver que eran mis celos los que hablaban; mis infatigables y frenéticos celos. Los tengo en demasía; no quiero darle a nadie el derecho de decir que es algo inherente a la condición de mujer. No quiero tu firma, quiero solo tu confianza, solo lo que puede brotar de ella. Espero con toda el alma que no te cases nunca; pero si no lo haces, no debe ser porque me lo hayas prometido. Ya sabes lo que pienso: que hay una nobleza en el hecho de

sacrificar algo por un bien común. Los sacerdotes, cuando eran verdaderos sacerdotes, nunca se casaban, y lo que tú y yo pretendemos realizar nos exige algo semejante al sacerdocio. Me resulta muy mezquino que la amistad, la fe y la caridad, y la ocupación más interesante del mundo… en fin, que una combinación como esta no represente por sí misma una razón vital. Ningún hombre que yo haya conocido se interesa un ápice, en el fondo de su corazón, por nuestra causa. La odian; la desprecian; tratarán de entorpecerla siempre que les sea posible. Oh, sí, he conocido a algunos que pretenden interesarse; pero ellos no son del todo hombres, y ni siquiera de sus convicciones estoy del todo segura. Cualquier hombre que uno vea está empeñado en una lucha a cuchillo limpio contra nosotras. No quiero decir que no haya algunos seres del sexo masculino que no estén dispuestos a patrocinar un poco nuestra causa; a darnos palmaditas en la espalda y recomendarnos moderación, sugerirnos algunas pequeñas concesiones; es gente que acepta que hay dos o tres pequeños puntos en los que la sociedad no nos ha hecho debida justicia. Pero cualquier hombre que pretenda aceptar nuestro programa *in toto*, como nosotras lo entendemos, por voluntad espontánea, antes de verse forzado a hacerlo… tal hombre lo único que desea es traicionarnos. Hay una multitud de caballeros que estarían felices de cerrarte la boca con un beso. Si un día te vuelves peligrosa para su egoísmo, para sus intereses ocultos, para su inmoralidad (como le pido al cielo diariamente que te vuelvas), será un gran triunfo para uno de ellos si logra persuadirte de que te ama. Entonces verás lo que es capaz de hacer, y hasta dónde lo puede llevar su amor por ti. Sería un triste día para ti y para mí y para todas nosotras si pudieras creer en alguna cosa semejante. Puedes ver que ahora estoy muy tranquila; he reflexionado largamente sobre el particular.

Verena la había escuchado con mirada seria.

—¡Olive! —exclamó—. ¡Eres una gran oradora! Podrías superarme con solo proponértelo.

La señorita Chancellor sacudió la cabeza con una melancolía no carente de dulzura.

—Puedo hablarte a ti, pero eso no constituye ninguna prueba. Hasta las mismas piedras de las calles, todas las cosas mudas de la naturaleza encontrarían una voz para hablarte. No tengo ninguna facilidad de palabra; soy tímida, tiesa, seca.

Cuando esta joven, después de luchar contra los vientos y mareas de la emoción, lograba emerger en las corrientes tranquilas de la razón, presentaba su aspecto más agradable; adquiría un tono de suavidad y de simpatía, una gentil dignidad, una sabiduría serena, que sellaban el aprecio de quienes la conocían lo suficientemente bien como para quererla, y que siempre impresionaba a Verena como una cualidad augusta. Sin embargo, tales estados de ánimo no se manifestaban con frecuencia ante el público en general; pertenecían solo a la vida privada de la señorita Chancellor. Uno de ellos la había poseído en aquel momento, y continuó dando explicaciones sobre la incoherencia que había atemorizado a su amiga con la misma tranquila claridad, la misma distancia del error de una mujer cuya autocrítica ha equilibrado las desviaciones sentimentales.

—No me consideres caprichosa si ahora afirmo que confío en ti sin necesidad de ninguna promesa. Te debo, les debo a todos, una disculpa por la grosería y la violencia que manifesté en casa de tu madre. Advertí de pronto, solo al ver a aquellos jóvenes, cuán expuesta estás a los peligros; y la idea me puso (por un momento) frenética. Puedo ver aún los peligros que te rodean, pero también puedo ver otros elementos, y eso me ha hecho recuperar el equilibrio. Tienes que estar en un lugar seguro, tienes que salvarte; pero tu salvación no debe provenir del hecho de tener las manos atadas, sino del desarrollo de tu inteligencia. Debe derivar del poder ver las cosas por tu cuenta, sinceramente y con entera convicción, de la misma manera que yo las veo; de la sensación de que para tu trabajo la libertad es esencial, y que no ha de existir libertad para ti y para mí salvo en el no hacer lo que a menudo te van a proponer hacer… ¡y a mí nunca! —La señorita Chancellor pronunció estas últimas palabras con un gesto orgulloso, no carente de cierto *pathos*—. ¡No hagas promesas, no hagas promesas! —continuó—. Preferiría que no las hagas. Pero no vayas a fallarme. Si me llegaras a fallar me moriría.

Su modo de reparar sus incoherencias era bastante femenino; deseaba obtener una seguridad a la vez que parecía rechazar una promesa, y se hubiera sentido enteramente feliz si lograba poner a Verena en condiciones de disfrutar de aquella libertad, para ella tan importante, impidiendo que la ejercitara en un sentido determinado. La muchacha estaba ya completamente bajo su influencia; tenía curiosidades y deseos latentes;

cuando estaba sola no pensaba siempre en la infelicidad de las mujeres; pero el timbre de voz de Olive la hechizaba, y ella encontraba ahí algo a lo que por lo menos una parte de su naturaleza respondía con entusiasmo, sobre todo en lo referente a los amplios conocimientos de su amiga y su altura de miras. La señorita Chancellor tenía una cultura histórica y filosófica, o, por lo menos, así le parecía a Verena, que pensaba que con ese binomio se podría al fin tener un dominio intelectual de la vida. Y había también un impulso más elemental; Verena deseaba complacerla sencillamente por el terror que le producía enojarla. Los sinsabores, enfados, desaprobaciones de Olive eran trágicos, verdaderamente memorables; empalidecía bajo su efecto, por lo general no vertía demasiadas lágrimas, como las mujeres inferiores (lloraba cuando se encolerizaba, no cuando se sentía herida), pero permanecía allí contraída y jadeante como si hubiera recibido una herida que arrastraría durante toda la vida. Por otra parte, sus elogios, sus satisfacciones eran tan suaves como el viento del oeste; y tenía ese rasgo de generosidad, el más raro de todos, que la distinguía: le agradaba asumir la obligación de la gratitud siempre y cuando no le fuera impuesta por un hombre. En esos casos, ni siquiera se daba por enterada. Consideraba que los hombres en general tenían tal deuda hacia el sexo opuesto que cualquier mujer, individualmente considerada, tenía un crédito ilimitado con ellos. El inesperado tono de moderación que había en su discurso sobre el tema de la posibilidad de que Verena incurriera en el error matrimonial le pareció a la joven cargado de una antigua belleza, una especie de sabiduría depurada de elementos terrestres; le recordó cualidades que creía propias de Electra o de Antígona. Esto le hizo desear más que nunca hacer algo que pudiera agradar a Olive; y a pesar de la labor disuasiva de su amiga declaró que le gustaría hacerle la promesa.

—De cualquier manera quiero prometer que no me casaría con ninguno de los señores que se encontraban el otro día en mi casa —dijo—. Me parece que aquellos son los que más temor te inspiran.

—Prométeme que no te casarás con nadie que no te guste —dijo Olive—. Eso ya será un consuelo.

—Pero a mí me gustan el señor Burrage y el señor Gracie.

—¿Y también el señor Matthias Pardon? ¡Vaya nombre!

—Bueno, él logra hacerse simpático. Sabe todo lo que a uno le puede interesar saber.

—Deberías decir todo lo que a uno no le interesa saber. Bueno, si te gustan todos, no tengo ninguna objeción que hacer. Solo si tuvieras preferencias comenzaría a alarmarme. No tengo ningún temor de que puedas casarte con un hombre repulsivo; el peligro, para ti, resultaría de un hombre atractivo.

—Me alegra oírte admitir que algunos son atractivos —exclamó Verena, con la risa ligera que su reverencia por la señorita Chancellor no había logrado eliminar—. A veces parecería que no hubiera uno solo que pudiera gustarte.

—Puedo imaginar a un hombre que me gustaría mucho —replicó Olive, después de un momento—. Pero no me gustan los que veo. Me parecen unas pobres criaturas.

Y, en efecto, el sentimiento más alto que podía experimentar hacia ellos era de un frío desprecio; pensaba que la mayoría eran tipos arrogantes y brutales. La conversación tocó a su fin cuando Verena, con su docilidad habitual, asintió a la optimista afirmación de su compañera de que el gusto que obtenía con la visita de estudiantes y periodistas era solo una fase, y que por consiguiente el progresivo desarrollo de su mente le haría entender si la injusticia de los hombres era tan solo un accidente o formaba parte de su naturaleza, pero que, de cualquier modo, debería cambiar mucho antes de considerar la idea de un matrimonio.

Hacia mediados de diciembre, la señorita Chancellor recibió una visita de Matthias Pardon, que quería preguntarle qué era lo que Olive se proponía hacer con Verena. Ella jamás lo había invitado a visitarla, y la aparición de un caballero cuyo deseo de verla parecía tan irrefrenable que lo dispensaba de tales preliminares no representaba en su vida un incidente tan frecuente como para que pudiera recibirlo con tranquilidad. Consideró la visita del señor Pardon una libertad, pero si esperaba transmitirle esta impresión no invitándolo a tomar asiento, estaba totalmente equivocada, ya que él mismo eliminó esta circunstancia ofreciéndole una silla. Los modales del periodista constituían un acto de hospitalidad para ambos, y ella se vio obligada a escucharle, sentada sobre el borde del sofá (por lo menos en su casa se podía sentar donde quisiera), aquella extraordinaria pregunta. Por supuesto no estaba obligada a responder, y a decir verdad apenas lograba comprender aquella pregunta. Pardon le explicó que se

la dirigía debido al intenso interés que tenía en la señorita Verena, lo que no hizo el asunto más comprensible, ya que ese sentimiento se manifestaba de una manera confusa. El periodista presentaba una especie de barniz de buen humor para demostrar que su indelicadeza era parte de su profesión; y pedía revelaciones de la *vie intime* de sus víctimas con el tono blando y confidencial con que un médico elegante interroga a sus pacientes. Quería saber qué se proponía hacer la señorita Chancellor, porque si no se proponía hacer nada, él tenía una idea —que no le escondería— consistente en tomar la empresa en sus manos.

—¿Ve usted? Lo que yo quiero saber es esto: ¿piensa que ella le pertenece a usted o a la sociedad? Si le pertenece a usted, ¿entonces por qué no la presenta ante el público?

No tenía la intención ni tampoco era consciente de su impertinencia; solo deseaba conversar tranquilamente con la señorita Chancellor. Sabía, por supuesto, que ella no tomaría el asunto tranquilamente, pero ninguna suposición le había impedido hasta el momento presentar al adversario una superficie tan pulida que casi brillaba; la idea de su poder de penetración y el respaldo majestuoso de los «grandes diarios» le daban siempre seguridad. En efecto, dio por descontadas tantas cosas que Olive permanecía muda mientras meditaba en ellas; y él se valió de lo que consideraba un inicio afortunado para expresarse con toda franqueza. Le recordó que había conocido a Verena mucho tiempo antes que ella; la había visitado el invierno pasado las noches que el periódico le dejaba libres, cuando el termómetro registraba diez grados bajo cero. Siempre la había considerado atractiva, pero no había sido sino hasta la presente estación cuando sus ojos se habían abierto del todo. Su talento había madurado, y ahora no tenía duda en calificarla de brillante. La señorita Chancellor se podía imaginar si, como un viejo amigo, iba a poder ver con indiferencia aquel hermoso florecer. Verena fascinaría al público de la misma manera que la había fascinado a ella (la señorita Chancellor), y, podía permitirse decirlo, a él mismo. El hecho era que la joven representaba una carta importante, y alguien tenía que jugarla. Nunca el público americano había conocido a una oradora más atractiva; podía dejar muy atrás a la señora Farrinder, y la señora Farrinder lo sabía. Aunque el campo estaba abierto para ambas, no cabía duda, debido a que sus estilos eran muy diferentes; de cualquier modo, lo que quería demostrar era que había sitio para la señorita Verena. Ya no había

necesidad de «pulirla» más, había que darla a conocer al público. Además, sentía que cualquier caballero que la llevara hasta el éxito ganaría su estima; le resultaría más atractivo… ¿quién podría decirlo? Si la señorita Chancellor deseaba mantenerla a su lado, era necesario que la presentara ya. Adivinaba, por algo que la muchacha le había dicho, que ella deseaba que estudiara más ampliamente sus temas… que siguiera una especie de curso. Pues bien, él quería decirle que no existía mejor preparación que la de estar, de pronto, ante unas doscientas personas que han comprado un billete para oírla hablar. La señorita Verena tenía un genio natural, y él esperaba que ella no fuera a marchitar esa naturaleza. Podía estudiar mientras hacía su carrera; pero ya poseía esa gran cosa que no se puede aprender, una especie de inspiración divina, como solían decir antes, y era hora de que comenzara a mostrarla. No iba a negar por qué sentía que aquello le concernía; estaba completamente fascinado por ella, y su admiración hacía querer verla elevada al rango que le correspondía. No le interesaba la manera en que llegase, pero su placer aumentaría si pudiera mostrarle a la joven ese sitio. Por consiguiente, le podría decir la señorita Chancellor: ¿cuánto tiempo creía que iba a poder retenerla? ¿Cuánto tiempo creía que podía esperar un humilde admirador? Naturalmente no había ido a interrogarla; eso, tenía que confesar, estaba muy claro; cuando era indiscreto quería saberlo. Había ido con una proposición concreta y eso le parecía una garantía suficiente para su visita. ¿Estaba dispuesta la señorita Chancellor a dividir con él… las… bueno, lo que él llamaba las responsabilidades? ¿No podían administrar juntos a la señorita Verena? En ese caso, ambos quedarían satisfechos. Ella podía viajar a su lado como su compañera de viaje, y él se encargaría de que el público americano respondiera a las conferencias. Si la señorita Chancellor la dejaba en libertad de presentarse, él se encargaría del resto. No era excesivo en sus demandas, solo quería que se la dejara durante una hora y media tres o cuatro veces a la semana.

En el curso de este monólogo, Olive tuvo tiempo de echar mano de todos sus recursos mentales, y preguntarse qué podía responderle a aquel prodigioso joven que pudiera hacerle sentir cuán baja y vil consideraba su propuesta de formar una empresa entre ambos para explotar a Verena. Por supuesto, la pregunta más sarcástica que se le ocurrió era también la más obvia, tanto que solo dudó un instante antes de preguntarle cuántos miles de dólares esperaba ganar él.

—¿Para la señorita Verena? Depende del tiempo. Su actividad podría durar por lo menos unos diez años. No descansaría hasta que no fuera escuchada en todos los estados —dijo con una sonrisa.

—No me refería a la señorita Tarrant sino a usted —replicó Olive, con la impresión de mirarlo con dureza a los ojos.

—¡Oh! ¡Lo que me deje usted! —respondió Matthias Pardon con una risa que contenía todo, y más que todo, el escarnio de la prensa americana—. Hablando seriamente —añadió—, no quiero obtener dinero de ella.

—¿Qué desea usted, entonces?

—Bueno, quiero contribuir a la historia. Quiero ayudar a las damas.

—¿Las damas? —murmuró Olive—. ¿Qué sabe usted sobre las damas? —Estaba a punto de continuar su discurso cuando él la interrumpió intempestivamente.

—Quiero colaborar en su emancipación en el mundo entero. Considero que este es uno de los problemas contemporáneos.

La señorita Chancellor se levantó; aquello era demasiado. El lector juzgará si logró su objetivo; pero en aquel momento ella no contaba con esa promesa de triunfo que reside en el hecho de usar cualquier ayuda que se nos ofrece. Tal es el castigo de las naturalezas insufribles, exclusivistas e imprevisibles; el no poder ver las cosas sencilla y claramente, sino de modo distorsionado, con relaciones perversas. A la joven le pareció que nada sería menos atractivo que deberle su emancipación a tipos de la calaña de Matthias Pardon; y era extraño que aquellas cualidades que él tenía en común con Verena, y que a Olive le resultaban tan románticas y conmovedoras —el haber surgido del pueblo, el tener contactos con la miseria, el vivir al día, el conocer las fealdades de la vida— no fueran capaces de ganar la simpatía de la señorita Chancellor. Me imagino que era por tratarse de un hombre. Le dijo que se sentía muy obligada por su oferta, pero que era evidente que no las entendía ni a Verena ni a ella. No, ni siquiera a la señorita Tarrant, a pesar de la vieja amistad que los ligaba. Ellas no tenían el menor deseo de notoriedad; solo querían ser útiles. Ellas no deseaban hacer dinero; la señorita Tarrant lo tendría siempre en abundancia. Ciertamente que ella tendría que aparecer ante el público y el público la aclamaría, pendiente de sus labios; pero una actuación inmadura y precipitada era lo que menos deseaban ambas. El

cambio en la ignominiosa situación de las mujeres no era una cuestión que resolver el día de hoy o el de mañana, sino en muchos años; y habría muchos puntos sobre los que meditar, muchos elementos que tomar en cuenta. En una cosa estaban dispuestas a no transigir: a que los hombres no las pudieran acusar de superficialidad. Cuando Verena apareciera estaría totalmente consciente de sus armas, como Juana de Arco (esta analogía se había incrustado definitivamente en la imaginación de Olive); estaría en posesión de datos y cifras, se enfrentaría a los hombres en su propio terreno.

—Lo que deseamos hacer, lo haremos bien —le dijo la señorita Chancellor a su visitante con considerable dureza, dejando que él se aplicara el caso a sí mismo como su imaginación mejor se lo indicara.

Esta noticia no lo dejó muy satisfecho, se sintió derrotado y desalentado, para decir la verdad. ¿No era como para enfermarse oírla hablar de aquel largo proceso de preparación? ¡Como si aquello pudiese interesarle al público que nunca tendría ocasión de saber si Verena estaba bien preparada o no! ¿No tenía la señorita Chancellor fe en la juventud? ¿No sabía lo que esa carta podía representar? Esta fue la última pregunta que Olive le permitió formular. Ella le hizo observar que podrían pasarse la vida entera hablando sin llegar a ningún acuerdo; sus puntos de vista diferían diametralmente. Además, era un asunto de mujeres; lo que ellas se proponían hacer les pertenecía a las mujeres y sería obtenido por las mujeres. A menudo le había ocurrido al joven Matthias que le mostraran la puerta, pero nunca la retirada le había resultado tan desagradable. Era cortés por naturaleza, pero hasta ahora nunca le había sucedido que le hicieran sentir que no era —y que no podría ser— uno de los factores de la historia contemporánea: aquella mujer rapaz se proponía suplantarlo en aquel papel. Le hizo pronto comprender que la consideraba una egoísta total, y que si prefería sacrificar una bella naturaleza a sus teorías antediluvianas y a su afán de dominio, una vigilante prensa diaria —cuya obligación era denunciar las injusticias— le pediría cuentas pronto. Ella respondió que si los periódicos se decidían a insultarla, aquel no era asunto suyo; un ultraje más a su sexo recibido en su persona no importaba demasiado. Después de que él la dejara sola pareció ver la aureola de un éxito cercano; la batalla había comenzado, y también un poco del éxtasis del martirio.

XVIII

Una semana después de aquel encuentro, Verena le comunicó que el señor Pardon deseaba ardientemente que aceptara casarse con él; y añadió, con el evidente placer de poder darle tan agradable noticia, que se había negado a aceptar sus proposiciones. Pensó que ahora, al fin, Olive creería en ella; pues la proposición era mucho más atractiva de lo que la señorita Chancellor parecía entender.

—El señor Pardon sabe presentar las cosas bajo una luz muy atractiva —dijo Verena —; dice que cuando sea su mujer, seré conducida hacia las alturas por una fuerza emotiva de la que ahora no puedo tener ni idea. Si me caso con él cuando despierte descubriré que soy ya famosa, se trata solo de que exprese lo que siento y él se ocupará del resto. Dice que cada hora de mi juventud es un bien precioso; y que nos divertiremos mucho viajando por todo el país. Me imagino que te darás cuenta de que todo esto ejerce cierta fascinación sobre mí, ya que por naturaleza no soy tan introvertida como tú.

—Te promete el triunfo. Pero ¿a qué le llamas triunfo? —le preguntó Olive, mirando a su amiga con una especie de benévola frialdad (una suspensión de la simpatía) a la que ya Verena se había acostumbrado (aunque le seguía resultando tan desagradable como la primera vez) y que hacía paladear más la aprobación cuando la aprobación llegaba.

Verena meditó durante un momento, y luego respondió, sonriendo confiadamente:

—Producir una impresión que resulte irresistible. Hacer que ciertas leyes sean abrogadas por el Congreso y por el poder legislativo y que otras entren en vigor.

Repetía esas palabras como si fueran parte de un catecismo aprendido de memoria, aunque Olive vio que ese tono mecánico era una especie de broma a la que no se podía

resistir; habían repetido esa definición tantas veces en el pasado, y la señorita Chancellor no había dejado pasar una sola ocasión para recordarle lo que *realmente* era el triunfo. Y le fue fácil en esa ocasión probarle que el éxito propuesto por el señor Pardon era algo muy diferente: era solo una trampa, un homenaje a la vanidad y a la impaciencia, un medio cualquiera para hacerla capitular, mientras él a la vez se llenaba los bolsillos. Olive era lo bastante consciente de la incoherencia general de su amiga; había advertido cómo en ciertas ocasiones podía apasionarse seriamente por las cosas, y cómo, poco a poco, perversamente, aunque lo hiciera de una manera inocente, se volvía banal: precisamente como ahora, cuando trataba de convertir una de sus más sagradas fórmulas en una broma. Había casi terminado por reconocer, sin embargo, que no le importaba que Verena fuese exactamente como ella. Olive Chancellor era de una sola pieza mientras que Verena estaba hecha de muchos pedazos que tenían, en las soldaduras, algunas caprichosas fisuras por las que alguna vez chisporroteaba un burlón fuego interno. La sustancial diferencia entre ella y Verena se confirmaba en el hecho de que la joven considerara seductora la proposición que el señor Pardon le había hecho de hacerla vivir en una especie de exaltación permanente; en el hecho mismo de prestarle oídos al señor Pardon. Pero Olive decidió también en esa ocasión dejar pasar tales aberraciones, considerándolas propias de una fase de la juventud, y de la cultura de los suburbios, tanto más que aunque se esforzara por ser lo más indulgente que le era posible, Verena le reprochaba —hasta donde la incurable blandura de Verena pudiera emitir un reproche— de no serlo suficientemente. Olive no parecía entender que mientras Matthias Pardon le pintaba aquel cuadro y trataba de tomarla de la mano (la imagen no era afortunada), ella había podido contemplar largamente, a través de las puertas que él abría, el vivaz tumulto del mundo; y que luego había apartado la mirada solo por afecto a su amiga, dirigiéndolo hacia pruebas más austeras y un esfuerzo más puro; solo por amor a su amiga, bueno, y por toda la hermandad de mujeres esclavizadas. De cualquier manera el hecho era que Verena había realizado un sacrificio; y esta reflexión, al pensarlo mejor, le dio a Olive un sentimiento mayor de seguridad. Parecía sellar así el futuro, ya que Olive sabía que el joven periodista no se dejaría apartar fácilmente del camino y sin embargo estaba segura de que Verena nunca cedería a él.

Era verdad que el señor Burrage aparecía con demasiada frecuencia por la pequeña casa de Cambridge; Verena se lo había dicho, le había referido tantas cosas que en verdad podía decir que lo sabía todo. Ahora iba sin el señor Gracie; sabía encontrar el camino solo, y parecía desear que no hubiera allí nadie más. Le resultaba tan agradable a la señora Tarrant que casi siempre los dejaba solos en la sala; esa era la mayor prueba de afecto que la señora Tarrant le podía hacer a un caballero que los visitara. Ahora sabían todo lo que había que saber sobre él; sabían que su padre había muerto, su madre era una mujer muy elegante y prominente en las esferas sociales, y él estaba ya en posesión de un hermoso patrimonio. Tenía muy buena reputación en Nueva York. Coleccionaba objetos hermosos, cuadros, antigüedades que se hacía enviar de Europa; muchos de esos objetos adornaban su departamento de Cambridge. Poseía bajorrelieves, brocados españoles y cuadros de los maestros antiguos. Era diferente a la mayoría de los estudiantes; parecía disfrutar mucho de la vida y pensaba que para hacerlo bastaba con entregarse a la vida. Por supuesto —a juzgar por sus posesiones— parecía considerar que eran necesarias muchas cosas para mantenerse de buen ánimo. Y un día Verena le comentó a Olive, aunque con retraso, que él deseaba que fuera a su apartamento a contemplar sus tesoros. Él quería mostrárselos, estaba seguro de que despertarían su admiración. Verena también estaba segura, pero no podía ir sola, y deseaba que Olive la acompañara. Tomarían el té en compañía de otras damas y Olive le podría decir qué pensaba de una vida tan colmada de objetos bellos. La señorita Chancellor pensó que era una fortuna para ella haber decidido no sobresaltarse ante esos accidentes, pues, de otra manera, ¿no se habría sentido profundamente alarmada? Le rogaba al cielo que aquellos pretenciosos jóvenes que no sabían qué hacer de su tiempo dejaran en paz a Verena; pero evidentemente no lo harían, la única salvación para la muchacha era frecuentar a todos los que se fueran presentando. Si un tipo comenzaba a hacerse demasiado presente ya ella tomaría sus previsiones. Si Olive no hubiese sido tan seca hubiera tenido una sonrisa para premiar la franqueza con que la muchacha había adoptado esta teoría. Parecía muy ansiosa por explicar que el señor Burrage no buscaba lo mismo que el pobre señor Pardon había pretendido; la dejaba exponer sus ideas con mayor amplitud que aquel otro caballero, pero no manifestaba ninguna señal de ofrecerse ni como esposo ni como empresario. A lo más que había

llegado era a decirle que le gustaba por la misma razón que le gustaban los esmaltes antiguos o los viejos tapices, y cuando ella había dicho que no podía entender en qué pudiera parecerse a esas cosas, le había contestado que se debía a que era verdaderamente excepcional y delicada. Aceptaba que fuera excepcional, pero había protestado contra la idea de que fuese delicada; era lo que menos le interesaba ser; y Olive podía deducir por esto cuán lejos estaba de aceptar todo lo que se le dijera. Cuando la señorita Chancellor le preguntó si respetaba al señor Burrage (¡y ya para entonces sabía con qué solemnidad Olive podía pronunciar aquella palabra!), Verena le respondió, con su risa más dulce y ligera, pero aparentemente con una perfecta buena fe, que no tenía el menor sentido declarar que lo respetaba o no, ya que toda aquella relación no correspondía sino a una simple fase, de la que ya habían hablado. Cuanto más pronto la pasara sería mejor, ¿no era así? Y parecía pensar que el tránsito se aceleraría con una visita a las habitaciones del señor Burrage. Como ya he dicho, Verena aceptaba jubilosamente la inevitabilidad de esta experiencia, y más de una vez le había hecho observar a Olive que si estaban decididas a emprender una lucha contra los hombres cuanto más supieran de ellos mejor sería. La señorita Chancellor le preguntó por qué no le pedía a su madre que la acompañara a ver aquellas curiosidades, ya que ella había mencionado que su propietario no había cometido el descuido de dejar de invitar a la señora Tarrant; y Verena dijo que eso hubiera sido lo más fácil, solo que su madre no estaba en condiciones, como Olive, para decirle si podía o no respetar al señor Burrage. El problema de decidir si el señor Burrage era o no digno de respeto asumió en la vida de estas notables dos jóvenes, en términos de la moral más elevada, las proporciones de un acontecimiento verdaderamente extraordinario. Olive, en un principio, sintió deseos de evadir (no el problema de decidir, pues ya sabemos que desde hacía mucho tiempo había decidido la cantidad de estima que le merecían casi todos los miembros del otro sexo) el incidente en sí, ya que si el señor Burrage llegaba a exasperarla demasiado, la expondría al peligro de que Verena pensase que era injusta con él. Estaba convencida de que su juego era mucho más inteligente que el del joven Matthias, y por lo mismo sentía deseos de vigilarlo; pero también consideró que no era prudente intentar suprimir la fase (era el término que

ahora siempre usaba) prematuramente; error en el que podía incurrir si, sin mayor demora, «establecía relaciones», como decía Verena, con el joven *connoisseur*.

Por consiguiente se decidió que la señora Tarrant debía aceptar la invitación de acompañar a su hija en la visita al señor Burrage, y a los pocos días se presentaron en su casa. Verena, por supuesto, tuvo posteriormente una infinidad de cosas que contar sobre ella, pero se basó más en las impresiones recibidas por su madre que en las propias. La señora Tarrant había hecho tal acopio de ellas que podían bastarle para rumiarlas durante todo el invierno; había coincidido con varias señoras de Nueva York que estaban «muy en boga», cuya conversación fue para ella fuente de grandes emociones. Les había dicho que se sentiría muy feliz si pudiera recibirlas en su casa, pero ellas aún no se habían aventurado a abrirse camino sobre los tablones del patio de los Tarrant. El señor Burrage en todo momento se había portado con mucha delicadeza y había hablado de sus colecciones, que eran maravillosas, de un interés verdaderamente excepcional. Verena había decidido que sí merecía su respeto. Él había admitido que en verdad no estaba estudiando derecho, había ido a Cambridge solo por formulismo; la joven no veía por qué eso no era suficiente cuando una persona podía ser tan simpática. Llegó al extremo de preguntarle a Olive si el gusto y el arte no eran en sí ya algo, y su amiga pudo ver que estaba muy comprometida en la fase. La señorita Chancellor por supuesto tenía la respuesta preparada. El gusto y el arte eran cosas buenas cuando ampliaban la mente, no cuando la estrechaban. Verena asintió, y dijo que entonces quedaba por ver qué efecto producían en la mente del señor Burrage; observación que le hizo temer a Olive que, en ese caso, todavía quedaba mucho por hacer, especialmente cuando Verena le dijo, poco después, que proyectaban hacer otra visita a casa del joven, y que en esa ocasión sería mejor que fuera ella; el joven había expresado el mayor deseo de poder recibirla, y que el deseo de Verena de poder admirar con ella la interesantísima colección del señor Burrage era aún más intenso.

Uno o dos días después, el señor Burrage dejó una tarjeta en la puerta de la señorita Chancellor, con una nota en la que expresaba el deseo de que pudiera tomar el té con él un determinado día en que esperaba la visita de su madre. Olive aceptó la invitación junto con Verena; pero al hacer esto se encontró en la situación, desacostumbrada para ella, de no saber de ninguna manera qué estaba haciendo. Le parecía absurdo que

Verena la indujera a dar tal paso, cuando era libre de ir allí sin ella, lo que le probó dos cosas: primero, que la muchacha se había interesado de una manera excesiva en el señor Burrage, y segundo, que su naturaleza era extraordinariamente afectuosa. ¿Podía haber en realidad algo que tuviera menos la apariencia de clandestinidad que esta sublime indiferencia por lo que ella consideraba como la mejor oportunidad para tener una aventura? Verena quería conocer la verdad, y era evidente que hasta aquel momento creía que Olive era su exclusiva depositaria. Su insistencia, por otra parte y por encima de todo, probaba que le preocupaba más la opinión de su amiga sobre Henry Burrage que la propia, lo que le recordaba las responsabilidades que se había echado encima al pretender cultivar aquella alma joven y generosa, y el lugar preeminente que ahora Olive ocupaba. Tales revelaciones deberían haberla satisfecho, y si no lo lograban por completo era debido a la amargura que Olive experimentaba en razón de que el sujeto sobre el cual se pedía su juicio era un joven carente de los peores vicios. Henry Burrage había contribuido a colocar a la señorita Chancellor en un «estado de ánimo» (como ambas señoritas lo llamaban) la noche en que lo había conocido en casa de la señora Tarrant, que no se había desvanecido con los rumores que le llegaban de que era un caballero y una excelente persona.

Esto se confirmó dolorosamente cuando tuvo lugar la visita a su apartamento; el joven mostró tanta cordialidad, gracia, amistad y consideración, tanta atención a la señorita Chancellor, hizo los honores de su nido de soltero con tanta naturalidad que Olive, durante buena parte de la visita, permaneció callada, examinando su conciencia, como si fuera un reloj que no marchara, con el fin de encontrar una razón para que el joven le disgustara. Advirtió que no había ninguna dificultad para que su madre le disgustara; pero esto desgraciadamente no venía al caso. La señora Burrage había llegado para pasar unos cuantos días al lado de su hijo; se alojaba en un hotel de Boston. Olive era consciente de que después de aquella reunión su obligación era invitarla a su casa; pero, por lo menos en ese sentido, se podía escudar en la absolución general concedida al carácter de Boston, y prescindir de ese acto de urbanidad. Lo que resultaba ligeramente irritante era la actitud neoyorquina de la señora Burrage, a quien parecía no importarle nada que una bostoniana la invitara o no; pero siempre hay alguna imperfección, me imagino, en la más dulce venganza. La señora Burrage era una mujer

de mundo, alta y corpulenta, pálida y más bien fea. Daba la impresión de ser lenta y bastante pesada, pero negaba esta suposición por su tono de voz brioso y alegre y sus risas breves, vibrantes y definitivas, con las que parecía apoderarse de las bromas (cualesquiera que fuesen) para siempre, y un aire de comprender al instante todo lo que veía y oía. Era evidente que estaba acostumbrada a hablar, y aun a escuchar, aunque no se dilatara demasiado en detalles y paréntesis; no era constante, sino intermitente, y uno podía advertir que odiaba las explicaciones, aunque no se podía suponer que hubiera algún motivo para temerlas. Sus favores se inclinaban hacia lo general, no a lo particular; era cortés con todo el mundo, pero de ninguna manera afectuosa, brillante sin tener que llegar a las confidencias, como hacía la gente en Boston cuando (en momentos de exaltación) deseaba mostrar que no era distante. Había algo en sus maneras que parecía decirle a Olive que su mundo era mucho más amplio; y nuestra joven se sintió desilusionada al no oír que hubiera vivido muchos años en Europa, ya que eso le hubiera permitido clasificarla dentro de las personas corruptas. Escuchó casi con un sentimiento de ofensa personal que ni la madre ni el hijo habían permanecido más allá del océano por más tiempo que ella, y que si había que considerarlos frívolos debía hacerlo individualmente. ¿Podía ayudarla a formarse tal juicio el ver que la señora Burrage declaraba su satisfacción por Boston, por la Universidad de Harvard, por el departamento de su hijo, por su taza de té (un antiguo Sèvres), que no era ni la mitad de malo de lo que ella esperaba, por el grupo que el joven había reunido en su honor (había tres o cuatro caballeros, uno de ellos era el señor Gracie), y por último, dándole la debida importancia, por Verena Tarrant, a quien trataba como si fuera una celebridad, bondadosa y hábilmente, pero sin ninguna ternura maternal ni nada que pudiera marcar la diferencia de edad? Le hablaba como si en ese sentido fuesen iguales, como si la fama y el genio de Verena hubiesen desvanecido las diferencias, y la muchacha no tuviera ninguna necesidad de aliento o protección. Sin embargo, no hizo ninguna alusión precisa a sus puntos de vista personales, ni le preguntó nada sobre el «don», omisión que le pareció bastante extraña a Verena, y sobre la que habló después con sorpresa y candor a Olive. La señora Burrage parecía considerar que todos los presentes poseían alguna distinción y algún talento personal, y que juntos constituían un buen grupo. Nada en sus modales parecía indicar que alimentara temores hacia Verena

en relación con su hijo; no parecía ser una persona a quien le hubiese gustado verlo casado con la hija de un curandero mesmeriano, y sin embargo parecía complacerla el hecho de que entre los invitados él la hubiera incluido para darle sabor a la hora que ella pasaría en Cambridge. La pobre Olive estaba sumida en un mar de ideas contradictorias; la horrorizaba la idea de que Verena pudiera casarse con el señor Burrage, y, sin embargo, la enfurecía que su madre se comportara como si la joven pelirroja, cuya frescura parecía deleitarla, no constituyera un peligro serio. Observaba todo esto a través de su hosco silencio, ese silencio consciente y ansioso al que decidió condenarse la mayor parte del tiempo. Podemos imaginarnos cuán clara hubiera resultado su visión con solo que hubiera tomado la situación con mayor sencillez; pues era lo suficientemente inteligente para no haber tenido que recurrir a la morbosidad, ni siquiera por propósitos de autodefensa.

Debe añadirse, de cualquier manera, que hubo un momento en que se sintió casi feliz, o en que por lo menos pensó que era una lástima no poder sentirse así. La señora Burrage le había pedido a su hijo tocar para ella «cualquier cosa», y él se sentó al piano y reveló un talento que podía satisfacer holgadamente el orgullo de aquella dama. Olive era extraordinariamente sensible a la música y le fue imposible no caer rendida ante el arte encantador del joven. Otra «cosa cualquiera» sucedió a la anterior; la elección de Burrage resultó de lo más eficaz. Los huéspedes permanecían sentados ante el rojo fuego de la chimenea, escuchando en silencio, cómodamente; una fragancia apenas perceptible emanaba de los leños ardientes y se mezclaba con el aroma de las melodías de Schubert y Mendelssohn; las lámparas cubiertas provocaban reflejos aquí y allá, creando entre las mesas y los pequeños muebles zonas de sombra entre las cuales resplandecía algún objeto precioso, un marfil labrado, una copa del siglo XVI. En tal ambiente le fue permitido a Olive durante una media hora rendirse, disfrutar de la música, admitir que el señor Burrage tocaba con un gusto exquisito; sentir como si aquella situación constituyera una especie de tregua. Sus nervios se calmaron, sus problemas por el momento desaparecieron. La civilización, bajo tal influencia, en tal atmósfera, parecía haber realizado su obra; la armonía regía la escena; la vida humana dejaba de convertirse en un combate. Llegó hasta el grado de preguntarse por qué se debía siempre luchar. Las relaciones entre hombres y mujeres, en ese agrupamiento

pintoresco, no tenían el aire de ser enconadas. En pocas palabras, gozó de un período de insospechada tranquilidad, durante el cual mantuvo la mirada fija en Verena, que permanecía sentada al lado de la señora Burrage, abandonada aún más completamente que Olive. Para ella la música era un deleite y su cara atenta se dirigía vagamente hacia los diversos puntos de la habitación, mientras sus ojos reposaban en los *bibelots* que emergían a la luz de la chimenea. La señora Burrage se volvía algunas veces a contemplarla y le sonreía afectuosamente; y entonces Verena le sonreía a la vez, mientras su expresión parecía indicar, oh, sí, que estaba dispuesta a abandonarlo todo, todos sus principios, todos sus proyectos. Aun antes de que fuera hora de retirarse, Olive sintió que ambas (Verena y ella) estaban completamente desmoralizadas, y ella solo logró hacer acopio de energías para llevarse a su compañera cuando oyó que la señora Burrage le proponía ir a pasar con ella una temporada en Nueva York. En este instante, Olive se dijo: «¿Se trata de un complot? ¿Por qué no pueden dejarla en paz?», y se dispuso a ponerle el manto sobre los hombros, como había hecho en otras ocasiones, a su joven amiga. Verena había respondido con bastante impetuosidad que se sentiría encantada de visitar a la señora Burrage; luego reprimió tales ímpetus, al observar la mirada de Olive, y añadió que tal vez la señora no le ofrecería aquella hospitalidad si supiera cuán firmes eran sus propósitos de luchar por la emancipación de la mujer. La señora Burrage le lanzó una mirada a su hijo y se rió; dijo que sabía perfectamente cuáles eran los puntos de vista de Verena y que era imposible que alguien manifestara más simpatía que ella hacia tales ideas. Ella estaba sumamente interesada en la emancipación de la mujer, y sabía todo lo que aún faltaba por lograr. Estos fueron los únicos comentarios sobre el gran tema; y no se le volvió a insistir a Verena, ni por parte del señor Burrage, ni por la del señor Gracie, de que se dirigiera a los estudiantes de Harvard. Verena le había dicho a su padre que Olive vetaba aquel proyecto, y Tarrant les había explicado a los jóvenes que, al parecer, la señorita Chancellor había decidido tomar el asunto en sus manos. Sabemos que no estaba de acuerdo con este proceder; pero la señorita Chancellor le había hecho sentir que ella procedía con absoluta seriedad, y tal idea lo atemorizaba al grado de eliminar en él toda resistencia, por producirle asociaciones de ideas terribles. La gente que había conocido que procedía con absoluta seriedad era un comité de caballeros que había investigado los

fenómenos de la «materialización» de los espíritus, unos diez años atrás. Habían concentrado sobre él las luces feroces de los científicos. A Olive le pareció que el señor Burrage y el señor Gracie habían abandonado su actitud bromista; pero eso no impedía que fueran menos cínicos. Henry Burrage le dijo a Verena, mientras esta se disponía a salir, que esperaba que pensara seriamente en la invitación de su madre, a lo que ella respondió que no sabía si en el futuro tendría el tiempo suficiente para dedicarlo a personas que ya compartían sus ideas; tenía la esperanza de poder llenar sus manos con las otras, las que no las compartían.

—¿Y su programa de trabajo excluye entonces todo recreo y diversión? —preguntó el joven, y su mirada expresaba una ansiedad real.

Verena sometió el asunto, como siempre, con su aire de brillante y generosa deferencia, a la consideración de su amiga.

—¿Crees tú que nuestro programa de trabajo debe excluir la diversión?

—Me temo que la distracción que nos hemos permitido esta tarde nos dure por largo tiempo —dijo Olive, sin dureza, pero con una considerable majestuosidad.

—Bueno, dime, ¿te pareció él digno de respeto? —le preguntó Verena, mientras las dos jóvenes caminaban al anochecer, una al lado de la otra, envueltas por sus capas de invierno, como mujeres consagradas a un oficio divino.

Olive hizo una pausa momentánea.

—Sí, mucho… como pianista —fue su respuesta.

Verena volvió a la ciudad con ella en el autobús de caballos (estaba pasando unos días en Charles Street) y esa noche dejó perpleja a Olive con una salida semejante a aquellos arranques de volubilidad a los que ella misma se había entregado mientras estaban en el confortable apartamento del señor Burrage, pero contra los cuales ahora reaccionó violentamente.

—Sería muy agradable vivir siempre así, tomar a los hombres tal como son y no tener que pensar en sus defectos… Sería muy agradable no tener que formularse tantas preguntas, sino pensar que todas han sido ya adecuadamente respondidas, a fin de que uno pudiera sentarse en un antiguo sillón español de cuero, con las cortinas corridas para no sentir el frío, para protegerse del mundo inmenso, terrible y cruel… sentarse ahí a escuchar a Mendelssohn y Schubert. ¡A ellos no les preocupó nada el sufragio

femenino! Y hoy confieso que ni siquiera a mí me parecía tan imperiosa su necesidad. ¿No sentiste lo mismo? —preguntó Verena, concluyendo como concluía siempre sus breves reflexiones con una solicitud de aprobación por parte de Olive.

Esta última consideró que era su deber responderle de un modo firme.

—Yo siento siempre esa necesidad, en todas partes, noche y día. La siento *aquí*. —Y la mano de Olive se dirigió solemnemente al corazón—. La siento como un mal profundo e inolvidable. La siento como si fuera una mancha en el propio honor.

Verena rió con una risa cristalina, y después de un suave suspiro, dijo:

—¿Sabes, Olive? A veces me pregunto si yo la sentiría tanto de no ser por ti.

—Mi querida amiga —respondió Olive—, nunca me habías dicho nada que expresara tan claramente la proximidad y santidad de nuestra unión.

—Tú me haces mantenerme en pie —continuó Verena—. Tú eres mi conciencia.

—Me gustaría poder decir que tú eres mi forma exterior, mi envoltura. ¡Pero eres demasiado bella para que sea así!

De esta manera Olive devolvió el cumplido de su amiga; y más tarde admitió que naturalmente sería la cosa más fácil renunciar a todo, bajar las cortinas, y pasar la vida en una atmósfera artificial, con lámparas color de rosa. Lo más fácil sería abandonar la lucha, dejar a todas las infelices mujeres del mundo sumidas en su miseria inmemorial, quitarse esa carga de los hombros, cerrar los ojos ante aquel oscuro panorama, y, en fin, expirar sencillamente. Verena respondió que para ella no resultaría lo más fácil expirar; que aquella idea era más negra que todo lo que el mundo pudiera contener; que no había vivido lo suficiente y que no quería dejar que sus responsabilidades la oprimieran. Y luego las dos mujeres acabaron, como a menudo les había ocurrido antes, por encontrar que estaban completa, inspiradamente de acuerdo, más que nunca decididas a vivir y a triunfar; a convertirse en grandes figuras a fin de no ser oscuras, y en poderosas con el fin de no ser inútiles. Olive había afirmado en diversas ocasiones que concebía la vida como algo verdaderamente sublime o como la nada absoluta. El mundo estaba lleno de maldad, pero se sentía feliz de haber nacido antes de que aquella hubiera desaparecido, y que la tuviera uno que enfrentar, y eso en sí ya era una tarea y una recompensa. Cuando todas las reformas fueran consumadas, cuando surgiera la aurora de la justicia, ¿no resultaría entonces la vida vacía e incolora? Nunca había

pretendido negar que el afán de alcanzar la fama era uno de sus mayores estímulos, y sostenía que el modo más efectivo de protestar contra el estado de inferioridad de las mujeres para un miembro de ese sexo era llegar a ser una persona ilustre. La persona que hubiese podido escuchar algo de la conversación de este par de jóvenes, posiblemente vanidosas, se hubiera sentido conmovida por su extraordinaria familiaridad con la gloria terrenal. Verena no la había inventado, pero era una pasión con que su amiga la había contagiado, y ahora la compartía en abundancia. A Olive le parecía que solo la conjunción de sus dos mentes —cada una de las cuales, por sí mismas, carecía de un grupo importante de facetas— podía formar un todo orgánico, que, para el trabajo que se proponían emprender, resultaría brillantemente eficaz. Verena era a menudo más irresponsable de lo que a ella le hubiese gustado; pero, por fortuna, dada su índole, después de volver a contemplar la idea divina —Olive la trataba siempre de mantener frente a sus ojos como si fuera una joya en una caja abierta —, volvía a exaltarse, se inflamaba, sabía transformar en acentos mágicos las palabras emitidas por los labios menos persuasivos de su amiga, se convertía nuevamente en una joven y pura Sibila. Entonces Olive percibía cuán fatalmente, sin las tiernas notas de Verena, su cruzada carecería de dulzura, de aquello que los católicos denominan unción, y, por otra parte, qué débil sería Verena en el terreno de la lógica y de las estadísticas si ella no estuviera a su lado. En fin, juntas se complementarían, obtendrían todo lo que se propusieran; juntas conseguirían triunfar.

XIX

Esta idea de su triunfo, un triunfo tan fulminante como remoto, pero precedido de la perspectiva solemne de un esfuerzo tan religioso que no carecía de momentos de éxtasis, llegó a ser tremendamente familiar para las dos amigas, especialmente para Olive, durante el invierno de 187…, estación con que se inició el período más activo de la vida de la señorita Chancellor. Hacia Navidad dio un paso que hizo avanzar sus proyectos inmensamente, y los puso, para su temor, en el camino normal. Consistió en la llegada de Verena a Charles Street, en cumplimiento de un arreglo celebrado entre Olive y Selah Tarrant y su esposa para que permaneciera allí durante algunos meses. El horizonte estaba perfectamente claro. La señora Farrinder había iniciado su *grand tour* anual. Estaba agitando al público desde Maine a Texas; Matthias Pardon (como era de suponer) se mantenía, al menos por el momento, tranquilo; y la señora Luna se había establecido en Nueva York, donde había alquilado una casa por un año, y de donde le escribió a su hermana que iba a encomendarle a Basil Ransom (con quien se mantenía en contacto para ese propósito) el cuidado de sus asuntos legales. Olive se preguntaba qué clase de asuntos legales podía tener Adeline, y esperaba que tuviera un litigio con el propietario de la casa o con su modista a fin de que fueran necesarias frecuentes entrevistas con el señor Ransom. La señora Luna le hizo conocer pronto que esas entrevistas habían ya comenzado; el joven de Mississippi había ido a cenar con ella; no había comido mucho, por lo que ella había podido ver, y hasta se temía que él no cenara todos los días. Pero ahora llevaba un alto sombrero de copa, como un caballero del Norte, y Adeline daba a entender que lo encontraba francamente atractivo. Había sido muy afectuoso con Newton, le había contado todo lo referente a la guerra (por supuesto en una versión absolutamente sudista, pero a la señora Luna en realidad no le

interesaba la política americana, y quería que su hijo conociera ambas versiones), y Newton no hacía sino hablar de él, llamándole «Rannie» e imitando su pronunciación en ciertas palabras. Adeline escribió después que había decidido dejar sus asuntos en sus manos (Olive suspiró, no sin magnanimidad, al pensar en los «asuntos» de su hermana), y más tarde aun le mencionó que estaba pensando seriamente en la posibilidad de que se convirtiera en el tutor de Newton. Deseaba que aquel interesante niño fuera educado privadamente, y sería mucho más agradable encomendarle aquel cargo a una persona que fuese (como en realidad lo era) un miembro de la familia. La señora Luna escribía como si él estuviera dispuesto a abandonar su profesión para hacerse cargo de su hijo, y Olive estaba absolutamente segura de que eso era solo una porción de su *grandeur*, de la costumbre que su hermana había adoptado, especialmente desde que había vuelto de Europa, de hablar como si cada una de sus cosas requiriera arreglos especiales.

A pesar de las diferencias de edad, Olive se había hecho desde hacía tiempo una idea de ella y consideraba que Adeline carecía de todas las cualidades que una persona necesitaba para resultar interesante. Era rica (al menos, suficientemente), era convencional y corta de ideas, muy amante de recibir atenciones de los hombres (con quienes tenía fama de ser muy audaz, pero Olive despreciaba ese tipo de audacia), interesada exclusivamente en una vida personal, egoísta e instintiva. Ignoraba del todo las tendencias de su época, las reivindicaciones del futuro, las nuevas verdades y los grandes problemas sociales, como si solo fuera un saco de prendas femeninas, lo que estaba muy cerca de ser la verdad. Era del todo evidente que carecía de conciencia, y le irritaba mucho a Olive el hecho de ver cuántas dificultades se ahorraba una mujer cuando estaba constituida de aquella manera. Los «asuntos» de Adeline, como ya he insinuado, sus relaciones sociales, sus opiniones sobre la educación de Newton, su actividad práctica y sus teorías (ya que, ¡santos cielos!, las tenía en abundancia), su espasmódica disposición a volver a contraer matrimonio, y sus más grotescas retiradas en presencia del peligro (porque ni siquiera tenía el valor de sostener su frivolidad), todas estas cosas eran objeto de trágicas reflexiones de parte de Olive desde que su hermana había vuelto de Europa. La tragedia no residía en ningún daño preciso que la señora Luna pudiera causarle (pues más bien le hacía honor al reírse de ella), sino en el

espectáculo en sí, en el drama, conducido por la mano del destino, cuyas escenas innobles y mezquinas se desarrollaban con extrema lógica. El *dénouement* naturalmente estaba en armonía con todo lo demás, y consistía simplemente en la muerte espiritual de la señora Luna, quien terminaría por no entender ni el discurso más común de Olive y se hundiría en la más crasa mundanidad, la complacencia extrema, la imbecilidad suprema de un pequeño y elegante conservadurismo. En cuanto a Newton, sería más definidamente odioso, si eso era posible, cuando creciera, de lo que ya lo era; en efecto, no se desarrollaría del todo sino que evolucionaría negativamente si su madre continuaba aplicando en él su fatuo sistema de educación. Adeline había convertido a Newton en un chico insoportablemente presuntuoso y egoísta en sus intentos de pretender que fuera refinado. Lo había mimado y maleducado, teniéndolo siempre pegado a sus faldas, suspendiendo las lecciones cuando él fingía que le dolía un oído, haciéndolo participar en las conversaciones, permitiéndole que le respondiera de mal modo, con una impertinencia que estaba más allá de su edad, cuando le imponía el más mínimo freno. El sitio que le correspondía, según opinión de Olive, era una escuela pública, donde los niños del pueblo le demostrarían qué poco importante era, si era necesario a fuerza de puñetazos; ambas damas habían tenido una gran discusión sobre este punto antes de que la señora Luna abandonara Boston; una escena que había terminado cuando Adeline abrazó y atrajo a su regazo al irreprensible Newton (él había entrado precisamente en aquel momento), y le hizo jurar que viviría y moriría siguiendo los principios de su madre. La señora Luna había declarado que si debía ser pisoteada —¡y ese era probablemente su destino!— prefería ser pisoteada por hombres y no por mujeres, y que si Olive y sus amigos se lograran apoderar del gobierno serían unos déspotas peores que los mencionados en la historia. Newton pronunció un juramento infantil, según el cual jamás llegaría a ser un destructivo e impío radical, y Olive después de eso tuvo la sensación de que no tenía que preocuparse más por su hermana y que debía dejarla sencillamente entregada a su destino. Ese destino sería probablemente casarse con un enemigo de su país, un hombre que, sin duda alguna, deseaba tratar a las mujeres con el látigo y los grilletes, como él y sus semejantes habían tratado hasta hacía poco a la desdichada raza de color. Si ella amaba tanto las deliciosas instituciones del pasado, él se las proporcionaría en abundancia; y si

deseaba tanto ser una conservadora, entonces tendría la oportunidad de saber lo que significaba ser la esposa de un conservador. Si Olive se preocupaba muy poco de Adeline, se preocupaba, en cambio, mucho más de Basil Ransom; se decía que ya que él odiaba a las mujeres que se respetaban a sí mismas (y entre sí) el destino lo trataría perfectamente si se colgaba del cuello a una mujer como Adeline. Tal era el modo en que debía operar la justicia poética: con la ley según la cual nuestros prejuicios, cuando tienen libre campo, se convierten en el propio instrumento de castigo. Olive consideraba todo esto, del mismo modo en que se esforzaba por considerar todas las cosas, desde un alto punto de vista, y terminó por convencerse de que no era por ningún peligro a la seguridad de su sistema nervioso el que deseara ver a sus dos familiares en Nueva York mezclados y comprometidos el uno con el otro. Si un acontecimiento como su matrimonio habría satisfecho su sentimiento de las conveniencias, esto hubiera sido solamente como la ilustración de determinadas leyes. Olive, gracias a la cualidad filosófica de su inteligencia, se interesaba extraordinariamente en la ilustración de las leyes.

No sé, sin embargo, cuál fue la iluminación que surgió de su conciencia (que ahora era fuente de múltiples satisfacciones) ante el pensamiento de que la señora Farrinder estaba emprendiendo la guerra en territorios lejanos, y volvería a Boston precisamente a tiempo para presidir una gran Convención Feminista que, como ya se había anunciado, tendría lugar en Boston en el mes de junio. Le agradaba que aquella mujer tan dominante estuviera lejos; eso le dejaba el campo más libre, volvía la atmósfera más ligera; la hacía pensar que no estaría sujeta a una crítica oficial. No he tenido tiempo para mencionar ciertos episodios que habían tenido lugar recientemente entre ambas damas, y me debo ahora contentar con esbozar, de paso, sus consecuencias. Estas podían resumirse en el comentario, que indudablemente no sorprenderá a nadie por su novedad, que dos damas dominantes tienen tan pocas probabilidades de entenderse entre sí como dos hombres dominantes. Desde aquella reunión en casa de la señorita Birdseye, tan importante en sus resultados para Olive, esta última había tenido ocasión de tratar más de cerca a la señora Farrinder, y estos contactos la llevaron a la convicción de que la gran dirigente de la revolución femenina era la única persona (en aquella parte del mundo) que poseía una voluntad más sólida y más segura que la suya.

Las aspiraciones de la señorita Chancellor se habían redoblado en los últimos tiempos; había comenzado a creer en sí misma, en un tono mayor, como nunca antes le había ocurrido, y percibía que cuando un espíritu encuentra a otro espíritu, se produce una mutua absorción o una tajante ruptura. Desde hacía mucho tiempo sabía que debía luchar contra la obstinación del mundo en general, pero ahora había descubierto que también tendría que enfrentarse a la obstinación de ciertos elementos del campo feminista. Esto complicaba el problema, y tal complicación por supuesto no hacía que la señora Farrinder resultara más fácil de ser asimilada. Como la naturaleza de Olive era noble y también la suya, la culpa no residía en ninguna de las dos, era solo una advertencia de que no debían ser usadas como señales fronterizas en la misma parte del campo. Si tales percepciones resultan delicadas cuando se trata de hombres, el lector no necesitará recordar las formas exquisitas que pueden asumir en naturalezas más refinadas. Así fue como Olive pasó en un lapso de tres meses de la etapa de veneración a la de competencia; ese proceso se había acelerado por la introducción de Verena en el ovillo. La señora Farrinder se había comportado del modo más extraño frente a Verena. Al principio había quedado impresionada, después ya no; en un comienzo pareció querer tomarla bajo su protección, y luego se había inequívocamente desinteresado de ella, haciéndole saber a Olive que ya había demasiadas oradoras de ese tipo… «¡De ese tipo!»; la frase reverberaba en el alma resentida de la señorita Chancellor. ¿Era posible que no advirtiera la categoría de Verena? ¿Con qué vulgares aspirantes a la celebridad la estaba confundiendo? El deseo original de Olive había sido el de obtener el apoyo de la señora Farrinder para su *protégée*; había deseado que la comandante en jefe le encargara a la joven alguna misión. Con ese propósito las dos jóvenes habían hecho más de una peregrinación a Roxbury, y en una de esas ocasiones la vena sibilina (en su forma más encantadora) había descendido sobre Verena. Se había entregado a ella, con naturalidad y graciosamente, en el curso de una conversación, y había derramado un torrente de elocuencia aún más conmovedora que la del discurso pronunciado en casa de la señorita Birdseye. La señora Farrinder había acogido aquello de la manera más seca; por supuesto no se parecía nada a su estilo de oratoria, aunque también este era notable y persuasivo. Se había discutido mucho sobre la oportunidad de que mandara una carta de presentación al *Tribune* de Nueva York,

cuyo efecto sería el de abrirle las puertas de la notoriedad a la señorita Tarrant; pero esa beneficiosa epístola jamás apareció, y al fin Olive percibió que era inútil esperar algún favor de la profetisa de Roxbury. Había habido reticencias, modestias, pequeñas reservas que habían terminado por detenerle la pluma. Si Olive no dijo de inmediato que estaba celosa del estilo más atractivo de Verena, era porque semejante declaración estaba destinada a producir mayor efecto un poco más tarde. Lo que dijo fue que evidentemente la señora Farrinder deseaba mantener el movimiento en sus propias manos y que veía con cierta suspicacia algunas tendencias romántico-estéticas que Olive y Verena, al parecer, deseaban introducir en él. Ellas insistían mucho, por ejemplo, en la histórica infelicidad de la mujer; asunto que a la señora Farrinder no le parecía interesar demasiado, al grado que llegaba a parecer que sus conocimientos de historia eran más bien parcos. Parecía querer comenzar con la situación actual, y exigía sus derechos, fuesen o no felices las mujeres. El resultado de todo esto fue que Olive extendió los brazos al cuello de Verena con un ademán en parte de indignación y en parte de júbilo; exclamó que deberían combatir sin ayuda de la humanidad, y que después de todo era mejor así. Si ellas representaban todo la una para la otra, ¿qué más podían desear? Podrían quedarse solas, pero eran libres, y este aspecto de la situación las inflamó del sentimiento de haber comenzado ya a ser una fuerza. Eso no significó que el resentimiento de Olive desapareciera, pues no solo alimentaba la convicción, indudablemente muy presuntuosa, de que la señora Farrinder era la única mujer en aquel ambiente con la estatura suficiente para poder juzgarla (una causa ya en sí de antagonismo, ya que si bien nos gusta ser elogiados por nuestros superiores, preferimos que los reproches procedan de otro tipo de personas), pero la opinión que insospechadamente había revelado, después de la estima implícita de los primeros encuentros, hacía que las mejillas de Olive se cubrieran súbitamente de rubor. Rogaba al cielo que no le permitiera volverse tan ciega, tan estrecha de miras. Ella era una mujer frívola, mundana, una *amateur*, una aventurera, una asidua de Beacon Street; el acoger a Verena Tarrant era solo un acto de tardío y ridículo juego de muñecas: tal era la luz a la cual la señorita Chancellor creía que la señora Farrinder la contemplaba. Tal vez fuera una fortuna que el error de apreciación fuese tan grave; sin embargo, no podía impedir que algunas lágrimas de ira aparecieran de vez en cuando en los ojos de Olive

cuando reflexionaba en la grosería con que se la juzgaba. ¡Frívola, mundana, Beacon Street! Le pidió a Verena compartir su voto de que el mundo conociera a su debido tiempo qué clase de persona era ella. Como ya he señalado, Verena, en aquellos momentos, se mostraba siempre a la altura de la situación. Sentía a veces secreto desagrado ante la idea de darle la espalda para siempre a Beacon Street; pero se hallaba tan enteramente en las manos de Olive que no había sacrificio al cual no hubiera consentido a fin de probarle a su benefactora que no era una joven frívola.

La cuestión de su permanencia en Charles Street se arregló durante una visita que Selah Tarrant había hecho a petición de la señorita Chancellor. Esta entrevista, que tuvo algunos rasgos curiosos, vale la pena de ser descrita, pero me veo constreñido a referirme solo a sus aspectos más sobresalientes. Olive deseaba llegar a un arreglo con él; deseaba aclarar la situación, así que, con todo lo desagradable que podía resultar recibirlo, le envió un mensaje para que se presentara a cierta hora, hora en la cual había dispuesto que Verena no se encontrara en casa. Ella ocultó este incidente al conocimiento de la muchacha, rechazando con solemnidad que aquel fuera el primer engaño (para Olive ese silencio equivalía a un engaño) que ella le hacía a su amiga, y preguntándose si tendría que efectuar otros en el futuro. Decidió en aquel momento no echar mano de otros aunque fueran necesarios. Le comunicó a Tarrant que había decidido retener a Verena por mucho tiempo, y Tarrant comentó que le producía mucho placer ver a su hija tan bien situada. Pero también insinuó que le gustaría saber qué pensaba la señorita Chancellor hacer con ella; y el tono de esa sugerencia le hizo sentir a Olive lo atinada que había estado al prever que aquella entrevista iba a tener un tono de negocios. Este carácter lo asumió de un modo muy definido cuando ella cruzó el salón para llegar al escritorio y le endosó al señor Tarrant un cheque por una cantidad muy considerable.

—Déjenos solas, completamente solas, durante un año, y entonces le entregaré otro.

Con estas palabras le entregó la pequeña hoja de papel que significaba tanto, sintiendo, al hacerlo, que con toda seguridad la señora Farrinder no habría podido comportarse de un modo menos inexperto. Selah observó el cheque, luego a la señorita Chancellor, nuevamente el cheque, el cielo raso, el suelo, el reloj y una vez más a su

anfitriona; luego el documento desapareció entre los pliegues de su impermeable, y ella pudo ver que lo guardaba en un sitio extraño de su extraña persona.

—Bueno, si yo no creyera que va usted a ayudarla a desarrollarse —comentó, y luego se detuvo mientras sus manos continuaban maniobrando, fuera de la vista, y le dirigió a Olive su amplia sonrisa carente de alegría.

Ella le aseguró que no debía preocuparse al respecto; el desarrollo de Verena era la cosa que más le interesaba en el mundo; tendría todas las oportunidades para cultivarse libremente.

—Sí, eso es lo más importante —dijo Selah—, es más importante que atraer a las multitudes. Eso es todo lo que nosotros le pedimos, que la deje actuar de acuerdo con su naturaleza. ¿No es cierto que todos los males de la humanidad vienen de la opresión? No trate de presionarla, señorita Chancellor; déjela florecer libremente.

Y una vez más el señor Tarrant iluminó su solicitud y su metáfora con el extraño y silencioso movimiento lateral de la mandíbula. Añadió, poco después, que suponía que debía consultar el asunto con la señorita Tarrant; pero Olive no respondió nada; solo lo miró con una cara que deseaba expresarle que no había nada que lo retuviera aún ahí. Sabía que el asunto se había arreglado ya con el consentimiento de la señora Tarrant; estaba enterada de todo por Verena, que le había dicho que su madre deseaba sacrificarse por el mayor bien de la hija. Tenía razones para saber (por supuesto no por medio de Verena) que la señora Tarrant había abrazado muy tiernamente la idea de una compensación pecuniaria, y no había temor de que fuera a hacer una escena cuando Tarrant regresara con un cheque en el bolsillo.

—Bueno, confío en que pueda desarrollarse como es debido, y que usted pueda obtener lo que desea; parece que solo tendremos que esperar un poco —observó pomposamente mientras se levantaba para despedirse.

—No se trata de un camino breve; es un camino muy largo —respondió Olive con helada altivez.

Tarrant se encontraba en el umbral de la puerta, titubeó un momento, confundido por la sequedad de la joven, ya que él siempre se había inclinado a la visión color de rosa del progreso, de la marcha de la verdad. Nunca había encontrado a nadie que hablara tan en serio como esa joven tajante y estricta que con tanto entusiasmo se había

entregado a su hija, y cuyo deseo de ver surgir una nueva aurora tenía tan perversos tonos de pesimismo, y quien, en medio de algo que parecía terriblemente honesto, estaba tratando de corromperlo como padre con una extravagante suma. Difícilmente sabía en qué lenguaje hablarle; le parecía que ningún tono podía ser suficientemente cortés cuando una dama adoptaba aquel tono sobre un movimiento que era considerado por algunas personas brillantes como muy prometedor.

—Bueno, me imagino que existe alguna ley de carácter misterioso… —murmuró, casi con timidez, y desapareció de la vista de la señorita Chancellor.

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Esperaba no volver a verlo pronto, y parecía que no había ocasión de tener que hacerlo, ya que sus contactos podían establecerse por medio de cheques. El entendimiento con Verena, naturalmente, había sido total; la joven había prometido permanecer con su amiga todo el tiempo que esta quisiera. Al principio había dicho que no podía abandonar a su madre, pero al final había llegado a pensar que no se trataba de un abandono. Era tan libre como el aire de ir y venir; podía pasar horas y días enteros con su madre cada vez que la señora Tarrant lo deseara; lo único que Olive le pedía era que, durante ese tiempo, considerara como su casa la casa de Charles Street. No hubo ninguna necesidad de discutir sobre este punto, por la sencilla razón de que en el momento en que la cuestión se presentó Verena estaba absolutamente encantada con su amiga. La idea de que Olive pudiera resultar encantadora podrá tal vez hacer sonreír al lector; pero yo uso ese término en su sentido original, no en el derivado. La fina red de autoridad y dependencia que su infatigable amiga había tejido en torno ella era ahora tan densa como una coraza; y Verena estaba completamente interesada en su gran causa; la veía a la luz de una activa y entusiasta fe. El beneficio que su padre esperaba obtener de ella estaba ya asegurado; sus cualidades se desarrollaban y florecían de la mejor manera. Olive veía la diferencia y el lector podrá imaginar cómo se regocijaba con ella: jamás había experimentado un placer mayor. La anterior actitud de Verena había sido de una sumisión pueril, y una simpatía agradecida y curiosa. Se había entregado a su sorpresa juvenil y a la voluntad prepotente de Olive, que con la actitud decidida con que llevaba a la práctica sus opiniones había logrado dominarla. Además la ligaba a Olive también la hospitalidad ofrecida, la perspectiva de nuevos horizontes sociales y el deseo de una vida distinta. Pero ahora se entregaba con una pasión desinteresada a la

obra que debían realizar juntas; las cosas le interesaban por sí mismas, nutría una fe ardiente, tenía la causa constantemente en su pensamiento. Su participación en aquella unión había dejado de ser puramente pasiva y receptiva; era también apasionada, y en ella encontraba la fuente de nuevas energías. Si Olive deseaba dedicarse a cultivar a Verena, podía confiar en que ese proceso se había ya iniciado y que su amiga se sentía tan satisfecha como ella misma. Se podía confesar a sí misma, sin miedo a que se la calificara de mujer sin corazón, que al abandonar a su madre lo había hecho por un fin noble y eminentemente moral. En realidad no la había abandonado de ningún modo, y pasaba horas enteras viajando entre Charles Street y la pequeña casa de los suburbios. La señora Tarrant suspiraba y se lamentaba, se envolvía en su chal y decía que no sabía si podía arreglárselas sola, y que, la mitad de las veces, cuando Verena estaba fuera, no se sentía capaz ni para contestar la campanilla de la puerta; por supuesto no dejaba escapar ninguna oportunidad para presentarse como alguien que ha pagado lágrimas de sangre para permitir la buena marcha del progreso humano. Pero Verena intuía (ahora, por primera vez, juzgaba un poco a su madre) que lamentaría que le tomaran literalmente la palabra y que se sentía bastante amparada por la generosidad de la hija. No quería renunciar a aquello en lo que siempre había depositado su fe —menos ahora que la señora Luna había partido, sin dejar ninguna huella, y las grises paredes de un sedentario invierno se estaban al parecer estrechando alrededor de las dos jóvenes—, no podía renunciar a la teoría de que una residencia en Charles Street terminaría por ponerla en contacto con las clases más brillantes. Se sentía vejada por la resignación de su hija a no asistir a recepciones y a que la señorita Chancellor no las ofreciera; pero la práctica de la paciencia no era nada nuevo para ella, y consideraba que al menos el señor Burrage invitaría a su hija a la ciudad, donde pasaba la mitad de su tiempo, quedándose habitualmente a dormir en el hotel Parker.

Era cierto que aquel joven afortunado visitaba a menudo a Verena, y que ella lo recibía con pleno conocimiento de Olive, siempre que esta se encontraba en casa. Entre las dos habían llegado a la determinación de no poner límites artificiales para terminar con la famosa «fase», y Olive experimentó, mientras duró, un sentimiento de heroísmo al acorazarse contra toda inquietud. Estaba convencida de que apenas si era justo que ella hiciera alguna concesión; si Verena había hecho un gran sacrificio de deber filial al

ir a vivir con ella (lo que, por supuesto, sería permanente… ya se encargaría de ir comprándosela a los Tarrant año tras año), ella no debía incurrir en la culpa (el mundo la juzgaría, en ese caso, con ferocidad) de prohibirle mantener los contactos sociales naturales. La amistad entre un joven y una joven era, según el más estricto código de Nueva Inglaterra, una relación social normal y, mientras las semanas pasaban, Olive no encontraba ningún motivo para arrepentirse de su temeridad. Verena no se estaba enamorando; sentía que ella podría darse cuenta, descubrirlo en el mismo instante en que ocurriera. A Verena le gustaba tratar con sus amigos; era una naturaleza esencialmente sociable; le gustaba brillar y sonreír y conversar y escuchar; en lo referente al señor Burrage consideraba que introducía una nota de distensión fácil y oportuna en una vida que se había vuelto un poco rígida (Olive estaba dispuesta a admitir también esto) por sus grandes propósitos cívicos. Pero la muchacha se había salvado, sin interferencias de ninguna especie, por su gran interés en aquellos proyectos. En esa época ya no era necesario establecer ninguna presión sobre ella; sus propias fuentes de energía habían comenzado a trabajar, y el fuego que la hacía resplandecer nacía en su interior. Permanecería para siempre sagradamente soltera; sus únicas nupcias serían celebradas ante el altar de la causa. Olive se retiraba siempre que el señor Burrage era anunciado; y cuando Verena más tarde trataba de referirle algo de aquellos encuentros, ella la hacía callar, le decía que prefería no saber nada; y lo decía con una dulzura solemne; esto la hacía sentirse muy superior, realmente noble. Para esas fechas ya sabía perfectamente (no sabría decir cómo, ya que Verena no le decía nada) qué clase de persona era exactamente el joven señor Burrage: un tipo ligeramente pretencioso y afablemente original; amaba demostrar cierta excentricidad, sosteniendo la causa del progreso; le gustaba rodearse de algo de misterio, fingir citas repentinas, visitar a personas anónimas; tenía el aire, en fin, de llevar una doble vida, de estar enamorado de una joven a quien nadie conocía. Por supuesto que con todo ello trataba de impresionar a Verena; pero lo que más le gustaba era situarla por encima de las otras jóvenes, las hijas de familias mundanas, con quienes bailaba en Papanti. Estas eran las imágenes que procedían de la rica conciencia moral de Olive.

—Bueno, parece estar vivamente interesado en nuestro movimiento —se atrevió Verena a anunciarle un día; pero aquellas palabras más bien parecieron irritar a la

señorita Chancellor, quien, como sabemos, no quería acceder a considerar las excepciones ocasionales de la gran conspiración masculina.

En marzo Verena le anunció que el señor Burrage le pedía en matrimonio, y que lo hacía con insistencia, suplicándole que por lo menos se detuviera a reflexionar antes de darle una respuesta final. Verena evidentemente se sentía muy feliz de poder decirle a Olive que le había asegurado al joven que no pensaría en esa cuestión, y que si él esperaba eso, que por favor no volviera a visitarla. Él en cambio continuó visitándola; por lo cual se podía prever que se había disuadido de obtener su consentimiento; y Olive estaba convencida de que había dejado de pensar en eso. Pensaba que le proponía matrimonio a cualquier muchacha que presumía que no iba a aceptarlo, y que lo hacía solo para coleccionar tales episodios, un álbum mental de declaraciones, rubores, dudas, rechazos, de la misma manera en que coleccionaba esmaltes y violines de Cremona. Por supuesto a él no le hubiera gustado emparentar con la casa de los Tarrant; pero tal temor no le impedía pensar que fuera conveniente para un joven de gran educación alentar a aquellas muchachas de baja condición que fueran guapas, buscando, sin embargo, cuidadosamente los casos en que tuvieran razones (aun las personas más humildes podían tener razones) para no aceptarlo.

—Te dije que no me casaría con él y no lo haré —le dijo Verena muy satisfecha de sí misma a su amiga; su tono quería significar que merecía cierta confianza por el modo en que había cumplido su promesa.

—Nunca pensé que lo hicieras, a menos que estuvieras convencida de ello —fue la respuesta de Olive; y Verena no encontró otra respuesta fuera de la alegría que le brillaba en los ojos, incapaz de decir que si hubiera sido solo por ella sí habría aceptado.

Tuvieron después una pequeña discusión cuando Verena insinuó que lamentaba haberlo desilusionado, a lo que Olive respondió inmediatamente que por tratarse de un joven egoísta, presuntuoso, arrogante y falso merecía tener que rumiar su derrota. La señorita Chancellor no experimentaba ya ningún remordimiento, como le habría ocurrido seis meses antes al pensar que se interponía en una oportunidad así para Verena, y se hubiera enfadado si alguien le hubiera preguntado si no creía que asumía demasiadas responsabilidades. Habría declarado, además, que ella no le ponía

obstáculos a nadie, y que de no haber estado allí Verena jamás habría tomado en consideración a aquel frívolo hombrecillo que hacía música mientras Roma ardía. Esto no le impidió a Olive decidir que lo mejor sería viajar a Europa esa primavera; un año de residencia en aquella parte del globo resultaría extremadamente agradable para Verena, y hasta podía contribuir a la evolución de su talento. Le costó a la señorita Chancellor reconocer que aún había algo bueno en el viejo continente, y que podría constituir una lección importante para dos buenas americanas como eran su amiga y ella; pero le convenía hacer aquella admisión no del todo sincera. En aquel continente de extranjeros ellas estrecharían aún más su amistad. Esto, por supuesto, sería escapar de la «fase» inevitable en vez de enfrentarse a ella; pero Olive decidió que si habían llegado indemnes al límite establecido (había fijado como término el 1 de julio) se podía enfrentar a ella con mayor justicia y generosidad que hasta entonces. Debo añadir que Olive pasó la mayor parte de este período sin sufrir serios sobresaltos sino, por el contrario, registrando muchos pequeños signos alentadores.

No había nada que pudiera disipar los buenos presagios con que su asociación con Verena Tarrant había estado hasta esa fecha rodeada. Se sumergieron en el estudio (tenían innumerables libros enormes tomados en préstamo del Athenaeum) consumiendo el aceite de las lámparas hasta bien entrada la noche. Henry Burrage, después de que Verena hubiera movido dulce y tristemente la cabeza en señal de negación, volvió a Nueva York y no dio nuevas señales de vida; solo sabían que se había refugiado bajo la opulenta ala materna. (Olive no podía imaginarse de qué manera iba a reaccionar la señora Burrage al saber que su hijo había sido rechazado por la hija de un curandero mesmeriano. Debía de sentirse casi tan vejada como lo hubiera estado en el caso de que el joven hubiera sido aceptado.) Matthias Pardon no había tomado ninguna venganza a través de la prensa; posiblemente estaba preparándose para hacerlo; de cualquier manera ahora que la temporada de ópera había comenzado, seguramente estaría muy ocupado entrevistando a las principales cantantes, de una de las cuales había hablado en una de las revistas más importantes (Olive por lo menos estaba convencida de que solo él podía escribir de aquella manera), como «una simpática mujercita con una nariz infantil y movimientos de gatita». Los Tarrant al parecer se habían abandonado a una vida de comodidades que hasta ese momento no habían

conocido, gracias al aumento de los ingresos que extraían de su excéntrica protectora. La señora Tarrant se beneficiaba ahora con los servicios de una «muchacha»; se enorgullecía en parte (aunque de cualquier modo prefería ese cambio) de haber hecho su *ménage* durante muchos años sin la ayuda —tan humillante para ambas partes— del trabajo servil y mercenario. Le escribió a Olive (le escribía siempre a Olive, quien jamás le respondía) que era consciente de haber descendido a un plano inferior, pero admitía, al mismo tiempo, que era un consuelo para su espíritu afligido tener a alguien con quien conversar cuando Selah estaba fuera. Verena, por supuesto, percibía la diferencia, que era insuficientemente explicada por un repentino aumento en la clientela de su padre (nunca nada de lo emprendido por su padre había conocido un aumento como aquel), y terminó por descubrir la causa, un descubrimiento que de ninguna manera turbó su ecuanimidad. Aceptó la idea de que sus padres recibieran un tributo pecuniario de la extraordinaria amiga que había encontrado en su camino en los momentos en que despertaba como mujer, del mismo modo que había acogido, sin oponer ninguna resistencia, la irresistible hospitalidad de la misma. No tenía un orgullo mundano, ni tradición de independencia alguna; no tenía la menor idea de lo que podía o no resultar conveniente; pero había solo algo que equilibraba esta perfectamente natural insensibilidad a los favores, es decir, su inveterada costumbre de no solicitarlos. Olive había temido que ella tuviera que ruborizarse un poco al enterarse de la modalidad gracias a la cual se había convenido que ambas pudieran dedicarse juntas a sus actividades; pero el color de Verena no cambió; para ella no era una novedad ni un hecho desagradable que sus progenitores fueran comprados, silenciados con dinero, tratados como se trata a la gente de la peor ralea cuando no se le puede cerrar la puerta en las narices; tanto que su amiga tuvo la impresión, después de esto, de que quizá sería imposible que existiera algo que pudiera ofenderla. Era incapaz de rencor, vivía completamente al margen de cualquier orden convencional, despojada de toda referencia demasiado personal. Era demasiado decir que perdonaba las injurias, lo que ocurría es que ni siquiera llegaba a advertirlas; en el acto de perdonar hay cierta arrogancia de la cual ella era incapaz, y su brillante bondad resplandecía sobre las muchas trampas que el destino puede tenderle a nuestra firmeza. Olive había considerado siempre que el orgullo era un elemento necesario de la personalidad, pero

en Verena no aparecía ningún rasgo que pudiera disminuir la pureza de su espíritu. Los lujos recientes de la pequeña casa de Cambridge, la que aun con su ayuda seguía pareciendo un penal, le volvía a recordar que antes de haber sido rescatada, la hija de aquella casa había atravesado un desierto de sórdida miseria. Había cocinado, lavado, fregado y zurcido; había trabajado más arduamente que cualquiera de las doncellas de la señorita Chancellor. Pero aquellas penalidades no habían dejado huella ni en su persona ni en su espíritu. Todas las cosas nuevas y brillantes se renovaban en ella con admirable naturalidad, todo lo feo y desagradable desaparecía a su contacto; pero Olive juzgaba que, tal como era, tenía derecho a una inmensa compensación. En el futuro tendría todos los lujos y comodidades posibles, y la señorita Chancellor estaba persuadida, sin asomo de dudas, de que las personas que se dedicaban a un elevado trabajo intelectual y moral, como era el caso de las dos jóvenes de Charles Street, entregadas a luchar por la comunidad femenina, debían disfrutar de las mejores condiciones materiales. No había en ella nada de sibarita, y había experimentado, al visitar los callejones y barrios miserables de Boston al servicio de la Organización de Caridad, la sensación de que no había extremo de enfermedad o miseria que ella no supiera mirar cara a cara; pero su casa había sido siempre gobernada con esmero; era una apasionada de la limpieza y una excelente mujer de negocios. En esa época, sin embargo, elevó el refinamiento al nivel de una religión; sus habitaciones brillaban de tan limpias, tan ordenadas, con una fragancia de rosas invernales. Entre esos suaves efluvios también Verena florecía como las rosas, que en Boston alcanzan su mayor perfección. Olive había siempre admirado el refinamiento de sus conciudadanas, su latente «adaptabilidad», su talento para adaptarse con solo una mirada a un rápido cambio de condiciones; pero la manera en que su compañera se desarrollaba gradualmente para ponerse a la altura de la civilización que la circundaba, el modo en que asimilaba todos los refinamientos y asimilaba todas las tradiciones, superaba cualquier teoría de su amiga. Los días de invierno eran tranquilos en el interior de aquella casa de Charles Street y las noches de invierno se sucedían monótonamente. Nuestras dos jóvenes cumplían con muchas obligaciones, pero Olive nunca había sido partidaria de correr demasiado de un lado a otro. Muchas conferencias sobre problemas y reformas sociales tuvieron lugar bajo su techo, y ella recibía a sus colegas

—formaba parte por lo menos de unas veinte asociaciones y comités— solo a horas preestablecidas, que exigía que los demás respetaran religiosamente. La participación de Verena en esos eventos no era activa; se deslizaba sonriente, escuchando, dejando caer ocasionalmente alguna frase inspirada, nunca banal, como si fuera una divinidad viviente que presidiera aquellas sesiones. Se daba por establecido que su parte se desarrollaría en el escenario, no entre bambalinas; que el suyo no era un papel organizativo, sino (por lo menos potencialmente) el de un «ídolo popular», y que las labores que la señorita Chancellor presidía tan eficazmente no eran sino los preparativos generales de la plataforma en la que, más tarde, su amiga ejecutaría sus sorprendentes pasos.

Las ventanas de la pared occidental del salón de Olive, que daban sobre el agua, permitían contemplar los rojos crepúsculos invernales; el puente largo y bajo que se tendía, sobre pilastras vibrantes, sobre el río Charles; las zonas cubiertas de nieve y hielo; los desolados horizontes suburbanos, castigados y desnudos por el rigor de la temporada; el vacío desolador, duro y frío del panorama; las sucias chimeneas de las fábricas en dirección a Charlestown y Cambridge, o la torre de los edificios públicos de Nueva Inglaterra. Había algo inexorable en la miseria de la escena, vergonzosa en la pobreza de detalles, que daba una impresión colectiva de tablas y láminas y tierra congelada, de albergues miserables, y líneas de ferrocarril tendidas a lo largo de las barracas de los más humildes, y vías del tranvía de caballos que surcaban en todas direcciones aquel camino peligroso; empalizadas deterioradas, terrenos baldíos, montañas de basura, patios llenos de tubos de acero, postes telegráficos, y los patios traseros de las casuchas de madera. Verena encontraba bello aquel paisaje, y lo era realmente cuando al caer la tarde aquel feo panorama se teñía de un claro y frío resplandor rojizo. El aire, en su frialdad, sin viento, parecía tan transparente como el cristal, las más suaves graduaciones de tono eran perceptibles en el cielo, el oeste se volvía profundo y delicado, cada objeto se hacía doblemente nítido antes de sumergirse en la oscuridad nocturna. Caían algunos copos de nieve color de rosa, «tiernos» reflejos brillaban en las aguas congeladas, el campanilleo de los tranvías adoptaba un tono casi argentino, y los hacía perder toda vulgaridad; y a lo largo del puente se perfilaban ondulaciones solitarias, distantes y confusas, sobre la luz agonizante. Estos

agradables efectos ópticos solían iluminar las ventanas del salón en la parte en la que a menudo se sentaban Olive y su amiga al anochecer, antes de que fuera hora de encender las lámparas. Permanecían allí admirando el crepúsculo, gozaban contemplando las sombras rojizas que se proyectaban sobre las paredes de la habitación, siguiendo embelesadas la fantástica transformación del escenario. Observaban cómo finalmente las estrellas aparecían en el frío cielo, y luego, estremeciéndose un poco, se tomaban del brazo y se retiraban, con el sentimiento de que la noche invernal era todavía más cruda que la misma tiranía de los hombres; daban la espalda a las cortinas corridas y se dirigían hacia la chimenea, donde las esperaba la tetera, y seguían conversando sobre el martirologio de la mujer, tema que jamás lograba agotar el interés de Olive. Había noches de abundantes nevadas, en que Charles Street estaba cubierta de una muelle blancura en la que parecía haber pequeñas islas de luces artificiales de amplia e intensa visión. Leían juntas muchos libros de historia, y los leían de acuerdo con su idea fija, encontrar una confirmación a la teoría de que su sexo había sufrido extraordinariamente, y que en un determinado momento en el curso de la historia de la humanidad las condiciones del mundo dejarían de ser tan terribles (la historia les parecía desde todos los puntos de vista algo horrible) si las mujeres lograban ocupar su puesto en la balanza. Verena pronunciaba muchas sugestiones que estimulaban la discusión; era ella, a menudo, quien consideraba el hecho de que en el pasado un buen número de mujeres habían sido investidas con el poder y que no siempre lo habían usado correctamente; ella, quien sacaba a colación a las reinas malvadas y a las lujuriosas amantes de los reyes. Pero las dos amigas se desembarazaban hábilmente de estos tipos de mujeres, y los crímenes públicos de María la Sanguinaria, la reprobable conducta de Faustina, la mujer del puro Marco Aurelio, quedaban muy satisfactoriamente clasificados. Si la influencia de la mujer en el pasado era la razón para justificar cualquier acto de virtud masculina, la idea contraria, la de la influencia masculina, explicaba suficientemente las ocasionales irregularidades del otro sexo. Olive se daba cuenta de cuán pocos libros habían pasado por las manos de Verena y cuán poco se debía leer en casa de los Tarrant; pero la muchacha atravesaba ahora los campos de la literatura con su habitual paso ligero. Todo aquello en lo que se interesaba servía para ilustrar su facilidad de aprendizaje, el «don» que Olive, que

carecía tanto de él, no se cansaba nunca de admirar. Nada la atemorizaba; sonreía siempre como si pudiera lograr cualquier cosa que se propusiera. De la misma manera en que sabía hacer otras cosas, sabía estudiar; leía con rapidez y tenía una memoria infalible; podía repetir, varios días después, pasajes enteros a los que solo parecía haber dado un vistazo. Olive, por supuesto, se sentía cada vez más feliz al pensar que su causa contaría con los servicios de una organización tan excepcional.

Todo esto indudablemente podrá parecer árido, y me apresuro a añadir que nuestras amigas no permanecían siempre encerradas en el laborioso salón de la señorita Chancellor. A pesar del deseo de Olive de disfrutar exclusivamente de su preciosa compañera y dedicar su atención a los comunes estudios, a pesar de recordarle constantemente a Verena que ese invierno debía ser puramente educativo y que las tonterías de las personas satisfechas e incapaces de regeneración no tenían nada que enseñarle, a pesar, en fin, de la severa y constante aplicación de las dos jóvenes, no debe suponerse que su vida no tenía muchos afluentes y tributarios personales. Pese a que la señorita Chancellor fuera considerada por todo el mundo como una mujer individualista y extraña, no dejaba de ser una típica bostoniana, y como típica bostoniana no podía sustraerse del todo a un «grupo». Se decía que formaba parte de él pero que no pertenecía a él; de cualquier modo estaba lo suficientemente ligada a él como para tener que ir en determinadas ocasiones a otras casas y recibir a sus moradores en la suya. Estaba convencida de que movía su taza de té con la cucharilla de la hospitalidad y que les hacía sentir a un cierto número de espíritus selectos que eran bien recibidos bajo su techo a las horas oportunas. Tenía preferencias por lo que ella denominaba la gente «real» y había algunas cuya realidad había puesto a prueba con métodos personales. Este pequeño grupo era bastante heterogéneo y más bien suburbano; abundaba en damas que deambulaban de la mañana a la noche con libros de la biblioteca del Athenaeum que acariciaban dentro del manguito, y con pequeños ramilletes de flores exquisitas que se regalaban unas a otras. Verena que, cuando Olive la dejaba a solas, disfrutaba con ver el paso de la gente desde la ventana, los veía pasar frente a la casa de Charles Street, siempre apresurados, como si se les hubiera hecho tarde para llegar a algún sitio. Envidiaba un poco su aire de preocupación y hubiera estado dispuesta a cualquier hora a correr los mismos riesgos que ellas. A menudo,

cuando se las describía a su madre, la señora Tarrant no sabía quiénes eran; había hasta días (se sentía tan desanimada) en que parecía que ni siquiera quisiera enterarse. Aún después de las disquisiciones de su madre, Verena no tenía sino vagas ideas sobre quiénes le hubiera gustado que fuesen, y solo cuando la muchacha le hablaba de los conciertos, a todos los cuales Olive estaba abonada y se hacía acompañar de su amiga inseparable, la señora Tarrant parecía sentir que en cierto sentido su hija estaba viviendo en el nivel para el cual la había preparado en la casa de Cambridge. Como es bien sabido, las oportunidades en Boston para oír buena música son numerosas y excelentes, y desde hacía mucho tiempo la señorita Chancellor cultivaba de la mejor manera aquella afición. Se desvivía, como suele decirse, por los programas más selectos, y aquel grandioso, oscuro, lleno de dignidad Music Hall, que ha sido testigo de tanta elocuencia y tanta melodía, y cuyas mismas proporciones y color parecen infundir respeto y atención, no proyectó la sombra protectora de sus cornisas aquel invierno sobre dos rostros más profundamente atentos que los de las dos jóvenes, para quienes Bach y Beethoven solo repetían, en un millar de formas, el tema que constituía su idea fija. Sinfonías y fugas eran solo un estímulo para sus convicciones, excitaban su pasión revolucionaria, dejaban volar su imaginación en la dirección hacia la que esta siempre se dirigía, y, mientras permanecían sentadas contemplando el gran órgano severo y florido, por encima de la estatua de Beethoven, tenían la sensación de que aquel era el único templo en que las adeptas de su fe podían dignamente celebrar el culto.

Y sin embargo no debe creerse que la música constituyera su mayor deleite; tenían otros dos que cultivaban por lo menos con el mismo celo. Uno de ellos era sencillamente la compañía de la señorita Birdseye, a quien Olive frecuentó más en ese invierno de lo que lo había hecho en el pasado. Resultaba más que evidente que su larga y admirable carrera se acercaba al final; su labor constante y seria concluía; sus anticuadas armas estaban rotas o en desuso. A Olive le hubiese gustado colgarlas como reliquias venerables de una lucha paciente, y esto era lo que parecía intentar, cuando inducía a aquella pobre señora a relatar sus batallas —jamás gloriosas ni brillantes, sino oscuras e inútilmente heroicas—, le hacía recordar a sus compañeras de armas, exhibir sus medallas y sus cicatrices. La señorita Birdseye sabía que su misión había

terminado; podía aún pretender que debía ocuparse de causas impopulares; podía hurgar en su inmemorial saco de cuero en busca de documentos, y suponer que tenía compromisos importantes que atender, podía firmar peticiones y participar en convenciones; le decía a la doctora Prance que si lograse hacerla dormir viviría aún para la realización de grandes mejoras; pero estaba enferma y fatigada, se sentía tan contenta de poder volver los ojos al pasado (lo que en la señorita Birdseye era una gran anomalía) como de dirigirlos hacia el futuro. Había comenzado a dejarse mimar por las colegas de la nueva generación; había días en que lo único que deseaba era poder sentarse frente a la chimenea de casa de Olive y discurrir sobre las viejas luchas, con la vaga satisfacción (ninguna sensación física de la señorita Birdseye podía ser muy aguda) de tener calientes los pies, protegida de las corrientes de aire tan frecuentes en las reuniones de comités, de no tener que esperar los tranvías de caballos que seguramente llegarían repletos; y también la agradable sensación no de que ella fuera un ejemplo para aquellas frescas vidas que comenzaban con más ventajas que ella, sino de que en cierto modo constituía un aliento, porque a través de ella podían medir el camino que las nuevas verdades habían tenido que recordar, pudiendo explicarles cuán diferentes eran las épocas en que ella era aún joven, hija de un maestro muy talentoso (su madre había sido también maestra), allá en Connecticut. Para Olive todo lo concerniente a su vieja amiga había tenido siempre un aroma de martirio, y su vejez ahíta de achaques, sin ninguna remuneración, desprovista de una pensión, lograba hacer aflorar amargas lágrimas a sus ojos, que brotaban del fondo mismo de sus combativas teorías. Verena la consideraba también como una figura humanitaria y pintoresca. Verena estaba acostumbrada a ver mártires desde la niñez, pero no conocía a ninguno que almacenara tantos recuerdos como la señorita Birdseye, o que hubiera estado a punto tantas veces de ir a dar a la hoguera. En los primeros días de la lucha abolicionista había escapado tantas veces que era una maravilla que luego pudiera contar aquellas peripecias sin hacer ostentación de su valor. Había peregrinado por los estados del Sur para distribuir la Biblia entre los esclavos; y más de uno de sus colegas, en el curso de esas expediciones, había sido golpeado y emplumado. Ella misma en una ocasión había pasado un mes en una cárcel de Georgia. Había predicado la templanza en círculos de irlandeses donde tal doctrina había sido recibida a balazos;

se había interpuesto entre esposas y maridos enloquecidos por el alcohol; había recogido de la calle cincuenta niños andrajosos y los había llevado a su pobre apartamento, les había quitado sus pestilentes harapos y lavado sus cuerpos llagados con sus pobres pequeñas manos. A los ojos de Olive y Verena ella encarnaba la humanidad sufriente; la piedad que sentían por ella era una parte de la piedad por todos los débiles y desamparados, y la imaginación de la señorita Chancellor se había sobre todo impresionado por el hecho de que aquella pequeña y mal vestida misionera fuera el último enlace de una tradición, y que cuando llegara al fin su hora, la edad heroica de Nueva Inglaterra, la edad de la vida pura y el pensamiento elevado, la edad de los ideales puros y la acción honrada, de la pasión moral y los experimentos nobles, terminaría para siempre. Era la frescura perenne de la fe de la señorita Birdseye lo que contagiaba a esas doncellas modernas su inextinguible amor por lo trascendental, la sencillez de su visión, la manera en que, a pesar de los errores, decepciones, el cambio de modas en las reformas, que hacía que los remedios propuestos por la generación anterior resultaran tan ridículos como sus sombreritos; lo único que era todavía actual para ella era la elevación del género humano a través de la lectura de Emerson y la frecuentación del Templo de Tremont. Olive tenía varios años de actividad en las misiones de la ciudad; también ella había curado niños enfermos en sórdidas pensiones, había entrado en habitaciones donde la situación familiar era violenta y un gran estruendo hacía palidecer a los vecinos. Pero pensaba que después de tales pruebas encontraba el consuelo de una bella casa, de un salón lleno de flores, un fuego encendido que alimentaba con fragantes ramas de pino, un servicio importado de té, un piano Chickering y la *Deutsche Rundschau*, mientras que la señorita Birdseye no encontraba sino una habitación desnuda y vulgar, con un horrible tapete floreado (parecido al del consultorio de un dentista), una estufa apagada, el periódico vespertino, y a la doctora Prance. Olive y Verena asistieron a alguna de las veladas organizadas por ella antes de que el invierno terminara, semejantes a la que hemos descrito al comienzo de esta historia, con la única diferencia de que la señora Farrinder no estaba allí para oprimir al resto con su grandeza, y de que Verena pronunció un discurso sin el concurso de su padre. La joven se había desenvuelto muy bien y había logrado resultados más satisfactorios que la vez anterior, y Olive pudo advertir todo lo

que había ganado en seguridad y en cultura desde el día que había comenzado su verdadero proceso educativo en la casa de Charles Street. Su discurso fue una especie de homenaje espontáneo a la señorita Birdseye, fruto de la ocasión y de la unánime ternura que las jóvenes componentes del grupo sentían hacia ella, que encontraron en la oradora un magnífico portavoz. Describió su carrera laboriosa, sus primeros compañeros (no olvidó citar de paso a Eliza P. Moseley), las dificultades superadas, los peligros y triunfos, la obra humanitaria realizada entre las multitudes, su serena y venerable vejez… todo ello para expresar, y quedándose corta, como dijo una de las damas, la manera en que todos consideraban a la anciana. La cara de Verena resplandecía y se iluminaba por una luz interior, y adoptaba una expresión de triunfo mientras hablaba; logró que en los ojos de la mayoría aparecieran las lágrimas. Según la opinión de Olive nada podía ser más gracioso y conmovedor, y advirtió que la impresión que produjo su amiga en esa ocasión fue más profunda que en la velada precedente. La señorita Birdseye deambulaba con sus ochenta años de inocencia, sus lentes que nada discernían, preguntándole a sus amigos si no era aquello algo verdaderamente espléndido. No se atribuyó nada del éxito sino que lo consideró solo como una brillante expresión del don de Verena. Olive pensó, después, que si se hubiera hecho una colecta en aquel momento, la buena anciana hubiera podido pasar sin problemas el resto de sus días; luego se acordó de que la mayoría de sus invitados eran tan pobres como ella.

Ya he adelantado que nuestras jóvenes amigas tenían otra fuente para fortalecer sus emociones que era distinta de las horas que pasaban con Beethoven y Bach, o escuchando a la señorita Birdseye describir cómo era antes Concord. Esta provenía de la maravillosa comprensión que habían obtenido del estudio de la angustia femenina. Se detenían en aquel capítulo celosamente, y de él extraían la parte más pura de su misión. Olive había meditado tan larga y tan seriamente sobre el tema que se sentía en completa posesión de él; era la única cosa en su vida que consideraba que verdaderamente dominaba. Estaba capacitada para exponérselo a Verena con la mayor autoridad y con riqueza de detalle, guiarla por sus laberintos a través de los más oscuros y tortuosos pasajes. Sabemos que no tenía ninguna fe en su propia elocuencia, pero era muy elocuente cuando le recordaba a Verena que la exquisita debilidad de las mujeres nunca

había constituido su defensa, sino que solo las había expuesto a los sufrimientos más agudos que la grosería masculina podía concebir. El odioso cónyuge las había golpeado sin piedad desde el inicio de los tiempos, y la ternura, la abnegación de ellas, le habían proporcionado la ocasión que requería. Todas las esposas torturadas, las madres maltratadas, las doncellas seducidas y luego abandonadas, que habían vivido en esta tierra ansiando morir, pasaron y volvieron a pasar ante sus ojos, y aquella interminable y oscura procesión parecía tender un millón de manos hacia ella. Olive permanecía sentada al lado de ellas en sus temblorosas vigilias, escuchaba las amenazas, aquellas voces que las hacían empalidecer y enfermar de miedo, caminaba con ellas hacia las aguas oscuras que ofrecían lavar la miseria y la vergüenza de este mundo, es más, llegaba a dar con ellas, cuando la visión se hacía más intensa, el último y estremecedor paso. Había analizado con extraordinaria agudeza su susceptibilidad, su blandura; conocía (o pensaba que así era) la infinita gama de la ansiedad, de la espera y del temor; y había llegado a convencerse de que eran las mujeres quienes, al final, pagaban por todo. En los momentos decisivos todo el peso de la especie humana caía sobre sus hombros; el intolerable peso del destino pesaba sobre ellas mucho más que sobre los hombres. Eran ellas quienes debían, ligadas y encadenadas, recibirlo; eran ellas las que debían soportar la espera y recibir todas las heridas. Los sacrificios, la sangre, las lágrimas, los terrores eran suyos. Su mismo organismo era en sí un reto al sufrimiento, y los hombres se habían aprovechado de eso con una impudicia que no conocía límites. Como eran las más débiles habían abusado de ellas, y por ser las más generosas habían resultado las más engañadas. Olive Chancellor habría basado su acusación en esos cargos generales; y su tesis, muy sencilla, se fundaba en esto: la extensa infelicidad que había sido siempre la verdadera esencia del género femenino era una monstruosa imposición artificial que exigía a gritos una venganza. Estaba dispuesta a admitir que también las mujeres podían ser malas; que había muchas en el mundo que eran falsas, inmorales, viles. Pero sus culpas de ninguna manera eran comparables con sus sufrimientos; habían expiado anticipadamente una eternidad, admitámoslo, de mala conducta. Olive vertía estas opiniones en su atenta y receptiva amiga; volvía a presentarlas una y otra vez, y siempre bajo una luz diversa, pero ante la cual parecían palpitar de verdad. Verena estaba inmensamente fascinada; un fuego sutil la invadía; no

tenía tanta sed de venganza como Olive, pero al final, antes de que partieran para Europa (no me detendré a describir la manera en que ella se entregó a ese proyecto), había llegado a las mismas conclusiones que su amiga; es decir, que después de muchos años de injusticia (eso debería ser después del viaje a Europa) los hombres deberían a su vez pagar.

LIBRO SEGUNDO

XXI

Basil Ransom vivía en Nueva York en un sitio bastante retirado del centro, hacia el este de la ciudad; ocupaba dos pequeñas habitaciones miserables de un edificio ruinoso que se hallaba en la esquina de la Segunda Avenida. La misma esquina estaba ocupada por una tienda de comestibles cuya proximidad resultaba fatal para cualquier pretensión que Ransom o sus coinquilinos pudieran haber tenido sobre la distinción del lugar. La casa tenía una fachada roja y sucia, con descoloridas persianas verdes. En una de las ventanas inferiores estaba colgado un cartel manchado por las moscas, con las palabras «Pensión con comidas» formadas con letras no del todo precisas de papel coloreado, de varias tintas, y rodeadas con una banda dorada. Los dos lados de la tienda estaban protegidos por un inmenso toldo que se proyectaba sobre una acera mugrienta y se sostenía por palos clavados en el bordillo. Bajo él, en unas tablas, había cestas y barriles en un agrupamiento desordenado y pintoresco; una ventanilla se abría bajo los pies de aquellos que se detuvieran a mirar con atención los productos que mostraban las vitrinas; un penetrante aroma de pescado en salmuera, combinado con una fragancia de melaza, estaba suspendido en el aire; la acera, junto a la ventanilla, estaba llena de sucias cestas de patatas, zanahorias y cebollas; y un brillante carro de colores vivos, con el caballo no uncido al tiro, aparecía al borde de aquella abominable calle (contenía agujeros y surcos de un pie de profundidad, y una inmemorial acumulación de basura), confiriéndole un aire pastoral, rural e indolente a una escena que de otra manera hubiera resultado expresiva de cierto nivel de civilización. El establecimiento era de esa clase que los neoyorquinos conocen con el nombre de «tienda holandesa»; y desde el umbral de la puerta se podía observar a los vendedores de caras enrojecidas, cabellos rubios y brazos desnudos. Menciono todo esto no porque tenga ninguna

influencia especial en la vida o en el pensamiento de Basil Ransom, sino por un viejo prurito de situar la escena y por obtener algún efecto de color local; es bien sabido que una figura no representa nada fuera de su escenario, y nuestro joven pasaba diariamente, con paso indiferente y distraído, es cierto, entre los objetos que brevemente he descrito. Una de sus habitaciones daba directamente sobre el portón de la casa; cuando un dormitorio es tan pequeño recibe en Nueva York el nombre de «sala-dormitorio». La sala de al lado no era mucho mayor, y ambas dominaban una fila de habitaciones de aspecto no menos miserable que las dos de Ransom; casas construidas cuarenta años atrás y que ya ofrecían un aspecto viejo y ruinoso. Estaban también pintadas de rojo y los ladrillos se acentuaban por un contorno blanco; estaban adornadas, en el primer piso, con balcones cubiertos con pequeños techos de lámina, con rayas de distintos colores y con elaboradas herrerías que les daban el aspecto oprimente de una jaula y las hacía asemejarse vagamente a los pequeños enrejados desde los que se puede ver hacia la calle sin ser visto, que son uno de los rasgos característicos de las ciudades orientales. Desde tales puestos de observación se dominaba la vista de la tienda de la esquina, de la calle solitaria y sucia, cuya monotonía se rompía solo por algún barril de basura al borde de la acera o con las lámparas de gas en equilibrio inestable sobre los postes, y más al oeste, al final de aquel trunco panorama, el esqueleto fantástico del ferrocarril elevado, que cruzaba transversalmente la calle, oscurecida y sofocada por la desmesurada espina dorsal y por millares de huesos de un monstruo antediluviano. Si no me estuviera negada la oportunidad, haría una rápida y breve descripción de las habitaciones de Ransom, de algunas personas de ambos sexos, por lo general no favorecidas por la fortuna, que habían hallado asilo allí; un retrato de la pequeña y arrugada *table d'hôte*, de dos dólares y medio a la semana, donde todo resultaba inapetecible y que funcionaba en los sótanos bajo la dirección de una pareja de desganadas negras, que se mezclaban en la conversación general y que emitían risitas semirreprimidas y misteriosas cuando aquella tomaba un tono atrevido. Pero en rigor no debemos interesarnos sino en lo que puede servirnos para asumir que el joven del Mississippi, año y medio después de su extraordinaria visita a Boston, no había logrado hacer muy lucrativo el ejercicio de su profesión.

Se había aplicado a ella con esmero, había sido ambicioso, y sin embargo no había triunfado. Durante las semanas anteriores al momento en que volvemos a encontrarlo, había comenzado a perder la fe en su destino sobre esta tierra. Para él era cuestión de preguntarse si el triunfo en alguna de sus formas le llegaría alguna vez; si un pobre joven de Mississippi, sin medios, sin amigos, a quien faltaba, además de una gran fuerza de voluntad, la astucia de la serpiente, artes personales y un prestigio nacional, podría ganar en Nueva York el juego de la vida. Había estado a punto de abandonar la empresa y de volver a la casa de sus antepasados, donde, como había sabido por su madre, quedaban todavía las suficientes reservas de maíz como para mantener la existencia. Nunca había creído demasiado en su suerte, pero durante el último año había sido víctima de aberraciones capaces hasta de sorprender a una constante e imperturbable víctima del destino. No solo no había ampliado sus relaciones, sino que había perdido la mayoría de los pequeños asuntos de los que tan complacido se encontraba un año atrás. No tenía ahora sino encargos mínimos, y había resuelto de la manera más confusa algunos de ellos. Tales incidentes no habían contribuido de una manera muy feliz a establecer su reputación; había sido capaz de advertir que esa bella flor podía ser destruida cuando era aún un capullo tan tierno que apenas si resultaba visible. Se había asociado con una persona que le parecía lo bastante competente como para remediar algunas de sus deficiencias: un joven de Rhode Island que tenía, según su expresión, intimidad con los procedimientos internos de la corte. Pero aquel caballero, por lo que se pudo ver después, necesitaba ser también regenerado, y la principal deficiencia de Ransom, que después de todo era la de no contar con dinero en efectivo, no resultó menos evidente cuando el colega, antes de una imprevista e inexplicable salida a Europa, retiró del banco los pocos ahorros de la empresa. Ransom permanecía sentado durante horas enteras en su oficina en espera de clientes que o no llegaban, o que si llegaban parecían no encontrarlo suficientemente alentador, ya que por lo general se retiraban después de expresar que tenían que pensar el asunto antes de proceder de cualquier manera. Después de haberlo pensado, eran muy raras las veces que volvían a aparecer, así que al final comenzó a preguntarse si no se trataría de algún prejuicio en contra de su aspecto sureño. Tal vez no les gustaba la manera en que se expresaba. Si hubieran podido sugerirle una mejor, él de buena gana la habría adoptado; pero las

maneras de Nueva York no se podían adquirir por precepto, y el ejemplo, de cualquier manera, en esos casos tampoco resultaba contagioso. Se preguntaba si no sería estúpido o poco capacitado, y al final se vio obligado a confesarse que era muy poco práctico.

Esta confesión era en sí misma la prueba de tal hecho, pues nada puede ser menos fructífero que semejante especulación, sobre todo cuando terminaba con tal conclusión. Era del todo consciente de que se preocupaba demasiado por la teoría, y así lo pensaban sus visitantes cuando se encontraban con él, con una de sus largas piernas enroscadas en la otra, leyendo un volumen de De Tocqueville. Ese era el género de lecturas que él disfrutaba; había reflexionado largamente sobre problemas sociales y económicos, sobre las formas de gobierno y sobre la felicidad de los pueblos. Las convicciones que se había formado al respecto no eran como para que se las confundiera fácilmente con las verdades de moda en su tiempo, y que un joven abogado en busca de negocios debía considerar sagradas; pero debía reflexionar que esas teorías probablemente no contribuirían más a su prosperidad en Mississippi que en Nueva York. A decir verdad no podía pensar en ningún país donde le pudieran resultar útiles. Se le ocurría pensar que sus opiniones eran rígidas y que en comparación con ellas sus esfuerzos eran flojos; y en consecuencia comenzó a preguntarse si, con sus ideas, podría hacer carrera. Siempre había sentido deseos de dedicarse a la vida pública; lograr que las propias ideas encarnaran en la conducta nacional le parecía la forma más alta de placer humano. Pero sin embargo había muy poco en sus estudios que tuviera relación con la vida pública, y se llegó a preguntar qué sentido tenía después de todo mantener una oficina y si no sería posible ejercer su profesión en la Biblioteca Astor, donde en las horas libres y durante los días festivos se dedicaba a la lectura de infinidad de libros sugestivos. Tomaba notas en abundancia y memorandos; a veces aquellos apuntes adquirían una forma que podía suscitar el interés de los editores de revistas. Tal vez los lectores aparecieran, ya que no los clientes; así preparó con esmero media docena de artículos en los que, una vez terminada la labor, le pareció haber omitido todos los puntos que se había propuesto inicialmente señalar, y los dirigió a las potencias que deciden el destino de los semanarios y revistas mensuales. Todos fueron devueltos con manifestaciones de agradecimiento, y se vio forzado a creer que el acento de su lánguido clima le procuraba igual fortuna con la pluma que

con los labios, de no haber sido por otra explicación que le fue sugerida por uno de los más explícitos de sus oráculos, en relación con un ensayo sobre los derechos de las minorías. Aquel caballero le hizo notar que sus doctrinas tenían unos trescientos años de retraso; indudablemente alguna revista del siglo XVI se hubiera sentido muy feliz de poder publicarlas. Eso iluminó sus propias sospechas de estar ligado a causas que, por su esencia misma, no podían ser sino impopulares. Aquel desagradable editor tenía razón en lo que se refería a su falta de actualidad; se había equivocado de época. Había llegado con muchos siglos de anticipación; no era demasiado anticuado sino demasiado novedoso. Esas impresiones, sin embargo, no le hubieran impedido ingresar en la vida política si hubiera existido un modo de representar una comunidad sin tener que ser elegido. La gente en Mississippi sería lo suficientemente excéntrica como para votar por él, pero, entretanto, ¿dónde encontraría algunos billetes de veinte dólares que ambicionaba hacer llegar de vez en cuando a las mujeres de su casa, reducidas como estaban a una dieta a base de harinas? Se le metió en la mente, con cierta firmeza, la idea de que sus opiniones no suscitarían ningún interés, y la evaporación de esos agradables proyectos le hizo sentir como un hombre en una barca, en alta mar, que ha perdido el último trozo de vela que le quedaba.

No trataré de hacer una descripción completa de las desatinadas teorías de Ransom, ya que estoy convencido de que el lector las intuirá en el transcurso de su actuación, pues tenían un alegre e ingenioso modo de aparecer en las conversaciones del joven. Les rendiré la justicia necesaria al decir que él estaba dotado por disposición natural de una buena dosis de estoicismo, y que, como resultado de una experiencia considerable en el campo intelectual, era, tanto política como socialmente, un reaccionario. Supongo que era muy presuntuoso, ya que se inclinaba demasiado a juzgar a su época. La consideraba parlanchina, histérica, lacrimosa, ahíta de ideas falsas, de gérmenes nocivos, de hábitos extravagantes y costumbres disolutas, por lo cual un gran cataclismo se avecinaba. Era un inmenso admirador del difunto Thomas Carlyle, y mantenía muchas reservas sobre los supuestos logros de la democracia moderna, pero él se enorgullecía de tener un antiguo pedigrí (que lo relacionaba con los realistas y caballeros ingleses) y a veces parecía estar poseído por el espíritu de algún robusto antepasado de ideas estrechas, algún señor de ancho rostro, peluca y espada al cinto,

con una concepción de la virilidad más primitiva de lo que nuestro temperamento moderno parece requerir, y un programa de felicidad humana mucho menos variado. Le gustaba esa tradición, tenía reverencia por sus antepasados y una cierta compasión por quienes habían nacido después. Al anotar esto, sin embargo, lo traiciono un poco, ya que él jamás mencionó tener tales sentimientos. Aunque consideraba su propia época demasiado charlatana, como ya he dicho, le gustaba hablar tanto como a los demás; pero sabía controlar la lengua si aquello resultaba más expresivo, y a menudo lo hacía cuando mayor era su perplejidad. Había pasado varias veladas sentado en una cervecería, fumando su pipa e inmerso en un profundo silencio. Esta actitud era tan firme que denotaba una crisis… la completa, la aguda conciencia de su situación personal. Era la manera más fácil que conocía para pasar la noche. En ese local los *Schoppen* eran muy altos y la cerveza muy buena; y como el propietario y la mayor parte de los concurrentes eran alemanes, y su lengua coloquial le era desconocida, no se veía obligado a sostener conversaciones inútiles. Observaba el humo y pensaba, pensaba tan intensamente que al final le había parecido agotar todos los temas sobre los que podía pensar. Cuando este momento de alivio mezclado con algo de desolación llegó (al final de la noche de la que nos interesa ocuparnos), él se encaminó por la Tercera Avenida y llegó a su humilde pensión. Hasta hacía poco tiempo había tenido un pasatiempo para matar aquellas horas y disipar tal estado de ánimo; una «actriz» de variedades, que vivía en la misma casa, y con quien había establecido las relaciones más cordiales, a menudo estaba cenando (traía la comida de alguna otra parte, todas las noches después del teatro) en el oscuro y cerrado comedor, y él solía pasar por allí para conversar con ella. Pero últimamente se había casado (lo que divertía mucho a Ransom), y su esposo se la había llevado a un viaje de bodas que a la vez debía ser una gira profesional. En esa ocasión subió con paso grave hasta sus habitaciones, donde (sobre el raquítico escritorio de la sala) encontró una tarjeta de la señora Luna. No tengo necesidad de reproducir totalmente su texto; solo será necesario un pálido reflejo. Le reprochaba haberse olvidado de ella, quería saber qué le ocurría, si se había vuelto demasiado mundano y por ello ya no visitaba a quien solo se interesaba en gente seria. Lo acusaba de haber cambiado, y quería saber la razón de esa frialdad. ¿Sería demasiado pedirle si por lo menos podía indicarle en qué modo lo había ofendido?

Ella había creído que tenían ideas afines… él sabía expresar las suyas de una manera tan apasionante. Le gustaba estar rodeada de personas con dotes intelectuales y ahora carecía de esas compañías. Esperaba que él pasara a visitarla —como era habitual hasta hacía unos seis meses— la noche siguiente; y fuesen cuales fueran los delitos que ella hubiera cometido o los cambios experimentados en él, quedaba como siempre su afectuosa prima, Adeline.

—¿Qué diablos querrá ahora? —Con esta exclamación bastante exasperada Basil arrugó la nota de Adeline.

Aquel gesto podía querer indicar que no deseaba tener noticias de ella; sin embargo, al día siguiente se presentó en su casa. Sabía lo que ella deseaba desde hacía tiempo, o sea casi un año; quería que se convirtiera en el administrador de sus bienes y en el tutor de su hijo. Él se había prestado de buena gana a esos deseos —se había sentido conmovido por la confianza que depositaba en él—, pero aquel experimento se había hundido rápidamente. Los asuntos de la señora Luna estaban en manos de administradores que los atendían perfectamente, y Ransom se dio cuenta inmediatamente de que su función consistía sencillamente en mezclarle en cosas que no le concernían. La ligereza con que Adeline lo había expuesto al escarnio de los legítimos guardianes de su fortuna le abrió los ojos con respecto a algunos de los peligros del parentesco; no obstante, se dijo que podía ganarse honradamente algún dinero dedicando una o dos horas al día a la educación del niño. Pero también esta se reveló como una vana ilusión. Ransom debía encontrar unas horas disponibles por la tarde; abandonaba sus asuntos a las cinco en punto y permanecía con su joven sobrino hasta la hora de la cena. Al cabo de unas cuantas semanas consideró que lo más prudente sería retirarse sin romper relaciones. Que la personalidad del joven Newton fuera notable era algo en lo que su madre insistía siempre; pero lo que la hacía notable, según descubrió Ransom, era la ausencia de cualquiera de las cualidades que ligan a un maestro con su alumno. La verdad era que se trataba de un chico insufrible, que manifestaba por la lengua latina una hostilidad personal, física, que se expresaba en ataques de ira. Durante esos paroxismos arremetía furiosamente contra todos y contra todo; contra el pobre «Rannie», contra su madre, contra los señores Andrews y Stoddard, contra los hombres ilustres de Roma, contra el universo en general, hacia el

cual, mientras yacía con la espalda sobre la alfombra, mostraba un par de tacones singularmente activos. La señora Luna tenía la costumbre de estar presente en las lecciones, y cuando estas crisis llegaban, como tarde o temprano tenían que llegar, a la etapa que ya he descrito, intercedía por su pequeño tesoro demasiado fatigado, y le recordaba a Ransom que aquellos eran los signos de una sensibilidad exquisita, suplicaba que se le permitiera al pequeño reposar un poco, y pasaba el resto del tiempo conversando con el preceptor. Muy pronto este pudo darse cuenta de que no se estaba ganando legítimamente sus honorarios; además, le resultaba desagradable la sensación de tener relaciones pecuniarias con una dama que no tenía el arte de esconderle el placer que experimentaba en imponerle obligaciones. Renunció a su puesto de tutor, y con un profundo suspiro de alivio tuvo la vaga sensación de haber escapado a un peligro. No hubiera podido decir de qué se trataba, y guardaba cierto respeto provinciano de tipo sentimental por las mujeres como para que se permitiera darles un nombre desagradable en sus propios pensamientos. Estaba acostumbrado a tratar a las damas con las antiguas formas de galantería; sostenía que eran criaturas delicadas y agradables, a quienes la providencia había colocado bajo la protección del sexo barbado; y no se trataba solo de una salida humorística cuando sostenía que cualesquiera que fuesen los defectos de los hombres del Sur, por lo menos se distinguían por su caballerosidad. Era un hombre que aun en una época en que dominaban las jergas podía pronunciar esa palabra con una cara absolutamente seria.

Esa audacia no le impedía pensar que las mujeres fueran sustancialmente inferiores a los hombres, e infinitamente tediosas cuando se negaban a aceptar el papel que los hombres les habían reservado. Tenía nociones absolutamente precisas sobre su lugar en la naturaleza y en la sociedad y estaba convencido de que ello no las excluía de ninguna manera de recibir el debido homenaje. Un caballero debía pagar ese impuesto con placer. Él admitía los derechos de las mujeres; consistían en una permanente reclamación de la generosidad y la ternura del sexo más fuerte. El ejercicio de tales sentimientos estaba lleno de ventajas para ambos sexos, y ellos florecían más libremente, por supuesto, cuando las mujeres eran refinadas y agradecidas. Debe añadirse que él tenía un concepto de la cortesía más elevado que la mayoría de las personas que deseaban el advenimiento de las mujeres legisladoras. Cuando he dicho

que detestaba ver mujeres ávidas y polémicas, y pensaba que su dulzura y delicadeza eran la inspiración, la oportunidad (la más grande) de los hombres, he trazado un tipo de mente que indudablemente chocará a muchos lectores por su crudeza. De cualquier manera eso le había impedido poner los puntos sobre las íes en aquel gradual descubrimiento de que la señora Luna estaba tratando de atraparlo sentimentalmente. El proceso fue largo antes de que se diera cuenta. Había percibido muy pronto que se trataba de una mujercita tremendamente desinhibida, y que había llegado, mucho más rápido de lo que él se hubiera dado cuenta, a dar por establecido un alto grado de intimidad. Pero dado que no le había parecido ni muy fresca ni muy bella, Ransom no podía explicarse fácilmente por qué a ella se le habría metido entre ceja y ceja casarse (nunca pareció dudar que a lo que Adeline aspiraba era al matrimonio) con un oscuro y paupérrimo hombre de Mississippi, que además debía mantener a otros familiares. No podía imaginarse que él respondía a cierto ideal secreto de la señora Luna, que amaba a los terratenientes, aunque carecieran de tierras, que adoraba a los meridionales por encima de cualquier circunstancia, que consideraba a su primo como un hombre fino, viril, melancólico y desinteresado, y que estaba segura de que sus propias concepciones sobre asuntos públicos, los temas de la época, el carácter vulgar de la vida moderna, encontraban en la mente de él una respuesta perfecta. Por el modo en que se expresaba podía deducir que era un conservador, y ese era el lema inscrito en su propia bandera de seda. Había adoptado esta impopular línea de conducta tanto por temperamento como por reacción a las opiniones «extremistas» de su hermana y por el aspecto de la horrorosa gente que gravitaba en torno a ella. En realidad Olive era una persona distinguida y que sabía usar su intelecto, y Adeline era presa de confusiones en que a menudo lo peor era considerado como lo mejor. Le hablaba a Ransom sobre la inferioridad de las repúblicas, lo desagradables que eran las personas que había encontrado en el extranjero en las legaciones de Estados Unidos, los malos modales de los sirvientes y de los empleados en ese país, de la esperanza que tenía en que «las buenas familias antiguas» pudieran dar el debido ejemplo; pero él nunca sospechó que ella pudiera cultivar esos asuntos (su tratamiento le parecía excesivamente cómico) con el propósito de llevarlo al altar, de seducirle de esa manera. Menos que nada podía suponer Ransom que ella fuese indiferente a su falta de ingresos, un punto en el que él

no le hacía justicia. Pues, al considerar el hecho de que él se hubiera mantenido pobre en esa época de tenderos como una prueba de delicadeza, a Adeline le producía un gran placer que, ya que Newton había recibido una pequeña propiedad depositada a su nombre (con cláusulas que demostraban lo providente que había sido el señor Luna y qué gran corazón debió haber tenido al no establecer ninguna cláusula desagradable, como el eterno luto, por ejemplo, en lo que a ella respectaba), ya que Newton, como he dicho, disfrutaba de una independencia económica que convenía a su personalidad, los propios ingresos de Adeline fueran lo suficientemente amplios como para sostener a dos personas, y ella pudiera darse el lujo de tomar un marido con quien compartirlos. Basil Ransom no adivinaba todo eso, pero adivinaba que algo debía de haber para que la señora Luna se tomara la molestia de escribirle notas de cuando en cuando, de que le propusiera pasear con él por el parque a horas poco habituales, y que cuando él le dijera que tenía negocios que atender ella respondiera: «¡Oh, qué plaga son esos negocios suyos! Me produce náusea esa palabra; no se oye hablar de ninguna otra cosa en este país. ¡Hay muchos medios de vivir sin esos asuntos! Solo depende de que usted quiera aceptarlos».

Él respondía muy rara vez a aquellas notas, y le resultaba extraordinariamente desagradable el modo en que, a pesar de su amor por las formas y el orden, su prima trataba de entrar por las ventanas cuando las puertas le habían sido cerradas; así que al fin Ransom comenzó a espaciar considerablemente sus visitas y al final las suprimió casi por completo. Cuando pienso en sus hábitos de cortesía casi supersticiosa hacia las mujeres, me viene a la mente que algún motivo muy poderoso debía haber habido para que le diera a su amigable —su demasiado amigable— prima la fría espalda. No obstante, cuando Ransom recibió su carta llena de reproches (después de que la misiva tuviera tiempo de trabajar en su espíritu), se dijo que tal vez había sido injusto y hasta brutal, y como fácilmente sentía remordimientos de esta clase, se decidió a restaurar el hilo roto.

XXII

Mientras él permanecía sentado al lado de la señora Luna, en el pequeño salón de esta, bajo la luz de una lámpara, se sintió más tolerante ante la presión que ella no podía evitar ejercer sobre él. Habían pasado varios meses y no estaba ahora más cerca del éxito que se había augurado. Sutilmente comenzó a deslizarse en su ánimo la idea de que había otra clase de éxito, agradable y visiblemente abierto ante él, no tan elevado ni tan varonil, eso era cierto, pero sobre el cual podría descansar sin merma, tal vez, de los principios de honor. La señora Luna había tenido una brillante inspiración; por primera vez en su vida había logrado frenar la lengua. No le había hecho ninguna escena; no había habido necesidad de preguntas ni de reproches; lo había recibido como si lo hubiera visto el día anterior, con el añadido de una especie de misteriosa melancolía. Es posible que se hubiera convencido de que lo había perdido; había algo mejor que la desolación y era tratar de retenerlo como amigo. Era como si ahora tratara de demostrarle que estaba tratando de iniciar una amistad. Se portó con humildad y dulzura, lo llenó de atenciones, movió una cortina que interceptaba el calor del fuego, advirtió que él tenía un aire de fatiga y pidió el té. No lo interrogó sobre sus asuntos; no le preguntó si estaba ocupado, si prosperaba; y esta reticencia le pareció a Ransom inesperadamente delicada y discreta; era como si ella hubiese imaginado, por una sutil intuición femenina, que su carrera profesional no le ofrecía a él nada de que poder vanagloriarse. Había en él tal simpleza que le hizo llegar a preguntarse si su prima habría mejorado. La luz de la lámpara era suave, el fuego chisporroteaba agradablemente; todo lo que lo rodeaba denotaba un gusto y un toque femenino; el lugar estaba decorado a la perfección; era exquisitamente íntimo y personal; era el retrato de un hogar bien acondicionado. La señora Luna se había quejado de las dificultades para

instalarse en Estados Unidos, pero Ransom recordó haber recibido semejante impresión en Boston, en casa de su hermana, y dedujo que ambas damas tenían en común el arte de saber vivir con elegancia. Desde luego resultaba mejor pasar una noche de invierno allí que en la cervecería alemana (el té de la señora Luna era excelente), y su misma anfitriona le pareció esa noche casi tan amable como la actriz de variedades. Después de una hora se sentía, no diré que dispuesto al matrimonio, sino ya casi casado. Frente a sus ojos desfilaban imágenes de bienestar, bienestar en el que se vio a sí mismo llenando resmas de papel con sus puntos de vista sobre varios temas, y con favorables ilustraciones de la elocuencia del Sur. Le resultó tolerable la idea de que si los directores de los periódicos no publicaban sus elucubraciones uno por lo menos las podía hacer imprimir a sus expensas.

Hubo un momento en que la ilusión fue casi perfecta. La señora Luna había tomado sus labores de punto; se hallaba sentada frente a él, del otro lado de la chimenea. Sus blancas manos describían pequeños arabescos y sus anillos emitían reflejos hermosos a la luz de la chimenea. Inclinaba la cabeza ligeramente a un lado, mostrando la redondez del mentón y del cuello, y sus ojos caídos (con aire de modestia) permanecían tranquilamente sobre su labor. Un silencio de unos cuantos minutos había caído sobre ellos, y Adeline —que decididamente había mejorado— pareció también sentir el encanto y no quiso romperlo. Basil Ransom era consciente de todo eso, y al mismo tiempo se hallaba vagamente sumergido en sus especulaciones. Si aquella situación le ofrecía tiempo libre, si le daba comodidad, ¿no era en sí un motivo válido? Un estudio concienzudo del problema que más le preocupaba: ¿no era tal vez esta una ocasión infinitamente deseable? Le pareció verse, sentirse, en esa misma silla las noches del futuro, leyendo algún libro indispensable bajo la tranquila luz de aquella lámpara. La señora Luna sabía cómo obtener aquella agradable penumbra. ¿No tendría así un modo de actuar sobre la opinión pública de su época, moderar ciertas tendencias, indicar ciertos peligros, emprender la crítica necesaria? ¿No era una obligación la de obtener las mejores condiciones para poder emprender tal acción? Y a medida que el silencio continuaba él casi llegó a persuadirse de que era su deber, de que una ley moral le obligaba a contraer matrimonio con la señora Luna. Precisamente en aquel momento ella levantó los ojos de su trabajo y sus miradas se encontraron; ella sonrió. Basil

creyó que ella había adivinado lo que estaba pensando. La idea lo sorprendió y alarmó un poco, así que cuando la señora Luna, con sus modales afables, dijo:

—No hay nada que me guste tanto en una noche de invierno como un *tête-à-tête* frente al fuego. Es como Darby y Joan; qué lástima que la tetera haya dejado de silbar.

Cuando pronunció aquellas palabras insinuantes, Ransom, con una sacudida de cabeza casi imperceptible, suficiente, de cualquier modo, para romper el encanto, respondió del modo más directo y en un tono de fría y distante curiosidad, si había tenido noticias de su hermana, y si sabía cuánto tiempo pensaba permanecer todavía la señorita Chancellor en Europa.

—Bien se ve que ha estado usted viviendo en su agujero —respondió la señora Luna —. Olive regresó hace seis semanas. ¿Cuánto tiempo creía usted que iba a soportar vivir allá?

—No tengo la más mínima idea —replicó Ransom—. Yo nunca he estado en Europa.

—Sí, y por eso me gusta usted —declaró la señora Luna con dulzura—. Que un hombre me resulte simpático sin haber viajado es para mí una novedad.

El joven se sobresaltó. Luego se rió ligeramente.

—¡Dios mío! ¡Cuán pocas razones debe de haber!

—Menciono solo esa porque puedo decirla; no me atrevería a confesar las otras.

—Me complace que haya otras por si un día también yo me decido a viajar —continuó Ransom—. Tenía la impresión de que guardaba usted un grato recuerdo de Europa.

—Y así es, pero eso no es todo —dijo la señora Luna filosóficamente—. Lo mejor sería que hiciera usted el viaje conmigo —añadió con cierta inconsecuencia.

—¡Con una dama tan irresistible! Iría hasta el fin del mundo —exclamó Ransom con el tono que la señora Luna encontraba siempre tan poco satisfactorio.

Formaba parte de su galantería de hombre meridional; su acento sureño aumentaba cuando decía ese tipo de cosas; eran frases que de ninguna manera lo comprometían. En más de una ocasión Adeline había deseado que no fuera tan asquerosamente cortés, como decía la gente en Inglaterra. Ella respondió que no le interesaba ir al fin de nada, lo que le interesaban eran los comienzos; pero él no se dio por aludido. Volvió al tema

de Olive, quiso saber qué había hecho allá, si había inflamado los ánimos de los europeos.

—Por supuesto; dejó a todo el mundo fascinado —dijo la señora Luna—. Con la gracia, la belleza y los modales que tiene, ¿cómo podía evitarlo?

—Pero ¿logró convertirlos? ¿Logró engrosar la cruzada que está dispuesta a marchar bajo sus banderas?

—Supongo que debe de haber visto a infinidad de gente necia, a una multitud de solteronas viciosas, fanáticas y afiebradas. Pero no tengo la menor idea de qué logró. Tal vez lo que llaman milagros.

—¿No la vio usted a su regreso?

—¿Cómo podría verla? Tengo una magnífica vista, pero no alcanza hasta Boston. —Y luego explicó que su hermana había desembarcado en aquel puerto; la señora Luna continuó preguntando si podía imaginar que Olive hiciera algo de primera categoría si existían otras inferiores—. Por supuesto le gustan los barcos malos, como los vapores de Boston, de la misma manera que le gusta la gente ordinaria, y las charlatanas pelirrojas, y las doctrinas absurdas.

Ransom permaneció silencioso durante un momento.

—¿Alude usted a… a aquella impresionante joven que conocí en Boston hace un año, en octubre? ¿Cómo se llamaba? ¿La señorita Tarrant? ¿Sigue la señorita Chancellor tan entusiasmada con ella como entonces?

—¡Por Dios! ¿No sabía usted que la llevó a Europa? Hizo ese viaje para educar su mente. ¿No se lo había dicho el año pasado cuando tenía usted la costumbre de venir a visitarme?

—Sí, sí, ahora lo recuerdo —dijo Ransom un poco pensativo—. ¿Y regresó con ella?

—¡Cielos! ¿No supondrá que iba a dejarla allá? Olive piensa que esa joven ha nacido para regenerar el mundo.

—Recuerdo también que me dijo usted eso. Bueno, ¿está ya formada su mente?

—Como no la he visto no podría decirlo.

—No va usted a ir a ver…

—¿A ver si está ya formada la mente de la señorita Tarrant? —La señora Luna estalló—. Iré si usted lo desea. Recuerdo que ella lo perturbó inmensamente cuando la conoció. ¿O de eso ya no se acuerda?

Ransom dudó un momento.

—No podría afirmarlo. Ha pasado tanto tiempo.

—Sí, no me cabe duda de que es el modo inconstante en que usted trata a las mujeres. Pobre de la señorita Tarrant si cree que logró impresionarlo.

—No pensará en esas cosas si su mente ha sido formada por su hermana —dijo Ransom—. Ahora me acuerdo de lo que me habló usted del desarrollo de esa amistad. ¿Y pensarán seguir viviendo juntas toda la vida?

—Me imagino que sí… a menos que alguien se obstine en casarse con Verena.

—¿Verena? ¿Es ese su nombre? —preguntó Ransom.

La señora Luna se le quedó mirando con la aguja en el aire.

—¿Así que también de eso se ha olvidado? Usted mismo me dijo en aquella ocasión, en Boston, cuando me acompañó a la colina, que era un nombre muy hermoso.

Ransom declaró que recordaba aquel paseo, pero que no se acordaba de nada de lo que hubiera podido decir aquel día; y ella sugirió, con sarcasmo, que tal vez a él le gustaría casarse con Verena. Ransom sacudió la cabeza tristemente, y dijo que temía que no estuviera en condiciones de casarse; en ese momento la señora Luna le preguntó por qué lo decía… ¿quería dar a entender (dijo después de una momentánea duda) que era demasiado pobre?

—De ninguna manera… Soy muy rico. ¡Tengo ingresos enormes! —exclamó el joven; así que, advirtiendo su tono, y el sonrojo que cubrió su cara, la señora Luna rápidamente juzgó que en esa ocasión había transgredido los límites.

Recordó (debió haberlo recordado antes) que él no le había hecho ninguna confidencia sobre sus negocios. Que aquellas no eran las maneras con que se podía tratar a un hombre del Sur, y que él era en definitiva tan orgulloso como pobre. En esa ocasión Adeline estaba en lo justo. Basil Ransom se hubiera despreciado si hubiera sido capaz de confesarle a una mujer que no podía ganarse la vida. Tales asuntos eran demasiado delicados para tratarlos con una mujer (los asuntos de las mujeres eran sencillamente, ser mantenidas, practicar las virtudes domésticas y ser encantadoras y

agradables), y había algo casi indecente en hablar de ellos. La señora Luna sintió doblemente su error, al darse cuenta de que él se negaba también el lujo de la simpatía (de la suya, en ese caso), y el suspiro vago pero audible que pasó por sus labios cuando volvió nuevamente a su labor expresaba de manera poco habitual su impotencia. Le dijo que por supuesto sabía cuán grande era su talento, y que podría hacer todo lo que quisiera; y Basil Ransom se preguntó por un momento si, admitiendo que ella le propusiera matrimonio a bocajarro, estaría conforme con la elevada galantería de un caballero del Sur negarse. Después de casarse con ella podría por supuesto confesarle que era demasiado pobre para contraer matrimonio, pues en tal relación aun un caballero del Sur de la más alta categoría puede en ciertos casos sincerarse. Pero de ninguna manera deseaba que las cosas se arreglaran de esa manera, y era consciente de que la consecuencia más pertinente a aquella conjetura sería tomar el sombrero y retirarse.

En el término de cinco minutos, sin embargo, llegó a desear esto tan poco como casarse con la señora Luna. Quería tener más noticias sobre la muchacha que vivía con Olive Chancellor. Algo había revivido en él, una vieja curiosidad, una imagen semidesvanecida, cuando supo que había vuelto a Estados Unidos. Se había formado una impresión errónea de lo que la señora Luna le había dicho, casi un año atrás, sobre la visita de su hermana a Europa; había supuesto que se trataría de una larga ausencia, que la señorita Chancellor quería tal vez apartar a la joven profetisa de sus padres, alejarla posiblemente de algún enredo amoroso. Además seguramente querían estudiar la situación de la mujer con las facilidades que Europa podía ofrecer; no sabía mucho sobre Europa, pero tenía idea de que era un lugar que ofrecía grandes facilidades. La noticia de la salida de la señorita Chancellor, acompañada de su joven colega, había suprimido en aquella época en Ransom cierta costumbre de ociosa, pero no menos atractiva, retrospección. Su vida en general no era rica en episodios, y aquel pequeño capítulo de su visita a su extraña, inteligente y caprichosa prima, con la velada en casa de la señorita Birdseye, y su vislumbre, repetida al día siguiente, de la extraña, bella y ridícula *improvvisatrice* pelirroja se desenvolvió en su memoria como la página de una novela interesante. Aquella página pareció borrarse, sin embargo, cuando se enteró de que las dos jóvenes se habían marchado, por tiempo indefinido, a tierras extrañas; eso

las eliminaba de sus perspectivas; disminuía su realidad; así que durante varios meses, un poco por el aumento de ansiedad que le producían sus negocios y la depresión de su espíritu, no había pensado para nada en Verena Tarrant. El hecho de que ella estuviera de nuevo en Boston, con la implícita proximidad que parecía existir entre Boston y Nueva York, se le presentaba a su imaginación como algo muy importante y agradable. Era consciente de que se trataba de una anomalía, y su conciencia lo hacía fingir sobre el particular. No recogió su sombrero para salir; se sentó en la poltrona resignado a soportar las pruebas con que la señora Luna podía desafiar su cortesía. Recordó que hasta ese momento no había hecho ninguna pregunta sobre Newton, quien a aquella hora había cedido al único poder capaz de domar lo indomable, y estaba durmiendo el sueño de la niñez, ya que no el de la inocencia. Ransom puso remedio a su omisión de un modo que provocó una respuesta torrencial de su anfitriona. El chico había tenido varios tutores desde que Ransom lo había abandonado, y no podía decirse que su educación hubiera sido descuidada. La señora Luna habló con orgullo del modo en que Newton se desenvolvía; si no lograba dominar las lecciones al menos podía dominar a sus maestros, y tenía la feliz convicción de que ella le procuraba una gran ayuda. La dilación de Ransom fue solo una medida diplomática, y diez minutos más tarde había vuelto al tema de las damas de Boston. Preguntó a qué se debía que con el agresivo tenor de su programa no se hubiera comenzado a sentir su llegada. ¿Por qué los ecos de la elocuencia de la señorita Tarrant no habían llegado a sus oídos? ¿No se había presentado todavía al público? ¿No pensaba ir a inflamar los ánimos de los neoyorquinos? Esperaba que ella no hubiera fracasado.

—No me pareció que hubiera fracasado el verano pasado en la Convención Feminista —respondió la señora Luna—, ¿o también ha olvidado usted eso? ¿No le informé del delirio que produjo allí y de todo lo que me dijeron en Boston? ¿No me acusará de no haberle mandado el *Transcript* con el informe sobre su gran discurso? Fue poco antes de que salieran para Europa; apareció entre banderas y cohetes.

Ransom protestó; insistió en que no había oído hablar de aquel episodio hasta ese momento; y así, confrontando las fechas, se dieron cuenta de que aquello había ocurrido después de su última visita a casa de la señora Luna. Esto, como es natural, le dio a ella la oportunidad para decirle que la había tratado peor de lo que suponía; de

cualquier manera tenía la impresión de haberle comunicado la noticia de la súbita ascensión de Verena a la fama. Al parecer lo confundía con algún otro, eso era posible; no iba a suponer que ocupara un puesto demasiado importante en su mente, sobre todo si se pensaba que había podido morir veinte veces sin que él se presentara. Ransom parecía dudar de que la señorita Tarrant fuera famosa. Si efectivamente lo fuera, los periódicos de Nueva York habrían publicado la noticia. Él no había leído nada en ellos, y no recordaba haber encontrado ninguna mención por aquella época (¿había sido en junio?) en que se celebró la Convención Feminista. Una reputación local, podía ser; Verena la tenía ya hacía año y medio, y entonces se esperaba que llegara a convertirse en una gloria nacional de primera magnitud. Estaba dispuesto a creer que ella hubiera creado cierto barullo en Boston, pero uno no puede darle demasiada importancia a esos éxitos sino hasta el momento en que ve la fotografía en los aparadores. Por supuesto sería cuestión de tiempo, pero él siempre se había imaginado que la señorita Chancellor la lanzaría con mayor premura.

Si hubiera adoptado intencionalmente un tono contradictorio para hacer que la señora Luna hablara no habría obtenido mayor información de la que deseaba. Era absolutamente cierto que no tenía ninguna referencia de las apariciones de Verena en el mes de junio precedente; había períodos en que la prensa le parecía tan idiota que durante semanas no le echaba ni un vistazo. La señora Luna lo informó de que no había sido Olive quien le había enviado el *Transcript* ni la que había escrito carta alguna para informarla sobre las interioridades de la convención; ella le debía ese servicio a un «caballero» que le escribía diariamente sobre lo que ocurría en Boston, y lo que cada familia comía todos los días. No era que aquello contribuyera en algo a su felicidad; pero el caballero del que hablaba no sabía qué hacer para complacerla, un bostoniano jamás podría imaginarse que no quisiera alguien saber qué ocurre ahí, y esa era su idea de resultar agradable, ¡pobre hombre! Olive nunca hubiera dado noticias detalladas sobre Verena. Consideraba a su hermana como ejemplo de lo profano, y sabía que Adeline no lograría entender por qué razón, queriendo tener una amiga inseparable, tenía que elegirla con tantas dificultades en el sector más horroroso de la sociedad. Verena no era sino una aventurerilla, y de tercera categoría; pero, por supuesto, era una muchacha bastante bonita si uno lograba tolerar aquel color de pelo.

En cuanto a sus padres, producían verdadero horror; era como si ella, la señora Luna, se jactara de ser amiga de la hija de su pedicura. Solo Olive podía inventar semejantes monstruosidades, y pensar, además, que estaba realizando algo grande para la humanidad; aunque a pesar de sus ideas de querer demolerlo todo y poner a los humildes en los puestos superiores, podía ser tan despectiva y soberbia, cuando se trataba de mezclarse de verdad, como podía serlo una vieja gran duquesa. Debía hacerle justicia al declarar que Olive odiaba a los Tarrant, al padre y a la madre, pero, sin embargo, le permitía a Verena ir y venir entre Charles Street y el horrible agujero en el que vivían, y Adeline sabía, gracias a aquel caballero que tan copiosamente le escribía, que de vez en cuando la muchacha pasaba una semana en Cambridge. Su madre, que había estado enferma algunas semanas, quería que se quedara a dormir allí. La señora Luna sabía además por su corresponsal que Verena recibía —o había recibido el invierno pasado— muchas atenciones de algunos caballeros. No comprendía cómo la muchacha podía conciliar eso con la idea de que el sexo femenino era autosuficiente, pero tenía motivos para pensar que aquella era una de las razones por las que Olive se la había llevado al extranjero. Su hermana temía que Verena se enamorara de algún hombre y quería impedirlo a toda costa. Por supuesto que una rendición de aquel tipo hubiera puesto en un grave aprieto a una joven que sostenía desde la tribuna que las viejas doncellas eran el tipo más elevado del género humano. Adeline consideraba que Olive la dominaba enteramente en la actualidad, a menos que, naturalmente, ella no utilizara sus expediciones a Cambridge para ocultar algunas citas amorosas. Era una zorrita astuta, y le preocupaban tanto los derechos de las mujeres como a ella el Canal de Panamá; el único derecho femenino que deseaba era el de subirse encima de algo para que los hombres pudieran admirarla. Permanecería con Olive mientras eso sirviera a sus propósitos, porque Olive, debido al respeto de que disfrutaba, podía elevarla de rango, y contrarrestar los efectos de su baja condición familiar, sin contar con que cubría todos sus gastos y le había obsequiado un viaje a Europa.

—Pero recuerde mis palabras —continuó la señora Luna—, le dará a Olive el golpe más tremendo que mi pobre hermana recibirá en su vida; se va a escapar con algún domador de fieras, o se casará con un saltimbanqui. —Y la señora Luna añadió que

aquello le serviría de lección a Olive—. Pero le causará un gran dolor; no habrá entonces quien la aguante.

Basil Ransom se sentía presa de extrañas emociones mientras la anfitriona se desahogaba con observaciones entre casuales y enfáticas, pero indiscutiblemente insidiosas. Las escuchaba con atención, pues para él representaban hechos de gran interés, pero se daba cuenta al mismo tiempo de que la señora Luna no sabía qué era lo que estaba diciendo. Había visto a Verena solo dos veces en la vida; no venía al caso oír decir que era una aventurera, aunque lo más probable era que terminara por abandonar a la señorita Chancellor. Sonrió con cierta sequedad cuando esta imagen pasó por su mente; no le desagradaba la idea de que sería vengado (pues aquello resultaría una venganza) de aquella insolente joven que lo había invitado para después sencillamente abofetearlo. Tenía también la sensación de haberse perdido algo al no haber sabido que la muchacha haría su aparición en la Convención Feminista; era una vaga sensación como de haber sido marginado y engañado. Las lamentaciones eran inútiles, ya que lo más probable era que no hubiese podido ir a Boston a escucharla; pero eso representaba que él no había compartido, ni siquiera lejana y vagamente, un acontecimiento que la tocaba tan de lleno. ¿Por qué motivo, además, habría tenido que compartirlo, y qué era más natural que el hecho de que las cosas que la tocaban más de cerca no eran importantes para él? Se hizo esta pregunta cuando regresaba a su casa por la noche. Por un momento la pregunta permaneció como suspendida en el aire: por consiguiente se sintió libre también de advertir que su imaginación se había casi extinguido: había ignorado que ella estaba de nuevo (relativamente) cerca de él, que en cierto modo se encontraba en la misma línea del horizonte (no más allá de la curvatura del globo terráqueo) y que sin embargo él no lo había advertido. Este sentimiento de pérdida personal, como lo he llamado, le hizo sentir después que debía hacer algo para remediarlo, para recuperarse. Con grandes dificultades hubiera logrado decir qué era lo que se proponía hacer, pero la idea, informe todavía, lo llevó en una dirección totalmente opuesta a la que había seguido un cuarto de hora antes. Mientras la observaba danzar delante de él se produjo otro silencio, en medio del cual la señora Luna le dirigió otra sonrisa angelical. El efecto que logró aquella sonrisa fue que Ransom se pusiera de pie; todo el horizonte mental se había repentinamente iluminado.

Decididamente, no era su obligación casarse con la señora Luna a fin de obtener los medios con los que proseguir sus estudios; se echó hacia atrás, como si fuera la mejor manera de sustraerse de aquel pensamiento.

—¿No me va a decir que se marcha usted ahora? No he dicho ni siquiera la mitad de lo que me proponía —exclamó ella.

Ransom lanzó una mirada a su reloj, vio que aún no era tarde, dio una vuelta por el salón, se volvió a sentar en otro sitio, mientras ella lo seguía con la mirada, preguntándose qué podía ocurrirle. Ransom tuvo mucho cuidado de preguntarle qué deseaba decirle, y tal vez para impedir que lo dijera fue por lo que empezó a hablar, libremente, con rapidez, en un tono distinto. Se quedó aún una media hora más, tratando de resultar agradable. A la señora Luna le pareció en esos momentos que su amigo poseía toda la distinción posible (ya sabía que era un hombre muy distinguido), y que era verdaderamente encantador. Él habló copiosamente, hasta que al fin tomó su sombrero ya con la firme intención de marcharse. Habló sobre la situación en el Sur, sus peculiaridades sociales, la ruina acarreada por la guerra, las nobles familias empobrecidas, los viejos guerreros con los pantalones hechos jirones pero aún no resignados, habló del lado patético y del cómico, haciéndola reír a momentos, casi llorar en otros, y decirse que cuando aquel joven se lo proponía no había nadie que pudiera hacerle pasar a una señora una velada más agradable. Solo después se preguntó por qué no se lo había propuesto sino hasta el fin de la velada. Le encantaban los caballeros arruinados; su gusto era diametralmente opuesto al de su hermana, que solo se interesaba por las clases bajas y por sus luchas sociales; lo que a Adeline le interesaba era la aristocracia derrotada (y parecía estar siendo derrotada en todas partes; ¿no era de ello un buen ejemplo Basil Ransom?, ¿no era como un *gentilhomme de province* francés después de la Revolución?, ¿o como un antiguo *émigré* monárquico del Languedoc?), quiero decir, los patricios despojados de sus riquezas, cuyas actitudes eran nobles y conmovedoras y hacia quienes era solo posible ejercer una caridad muy discreta, ya que su orgullo era de lo más susceptible. En todas las visiones que la señora Luna tenía de sí misma, la discreción era el rasgo fundamental.

—¿Va a dejar nuevamente pasar diez años antes de volver a visitarme? —le preguntó mientras Basil Ransom le deseaba buenas noches—. Avísemelo usted, porque entre esta

visita y la siguiente podría tener el tiempo de ir y volver a Europa. Pero procuraré llegar el día anterior.

En vez de responder a esa salida Ransom le preguntó:

—¿No piensa usted ir a Boston un día de estos? ¿No va usted a visitar pronto a su hermana?

La señora Luna lo miró estupefacta.

—¿Qué ventaja le reportaría eso a usted? Perdone mi estupidez —añadió inmediatamente—; por supuesto que me apartaré de su vista. ¡Muchísimas gracias!

—No quiero que se aparte usted de mi vista; pero me gustaría tener más noticias de la señorita Olive.

—¿Y a qué viene todo esto? ¡Usted sabe que la aborrece! —Y antes de que Ransom pudiera anteponer alguna objeción, la señora Luna volvió a comenzar—. ¡Me parece que cuando dice usted la señorita Olive lo que quiere decir es la señorita Verena! —Sus ojos lo penetraron durante un minuto cargados de una intención perversa; luego exclamó—: Basil Ransom, ¿se ha enamorado usted de esa criatura?

Él trató de reír con naturalidad, sin declararse culpable, a fin de tranquilizar a la señora Luna. Luego expresó con sencillez los puntos de su defensa.

—¿Cómo iba a poder enamorarme de ella? La he visto tan solo dos veces en mi vida.

—Si la hubiera visto usted más veces, no me produciría ningún temor. Me extraña su deseo de querer expedirme a Boston —continuó la anfitriona—. No tengo ninguna prisa para volver a convivir con Olive; además, esa muchacha ocupa toda la casa. Lo mejor sería que fuera usted mismo.

—Nada me gustaría más —dijo Ransom.

—Tal vez le gustaría que invitara a Verena a pasar un mes conmigo… Esa sería la manera de atraerlo a mi casa —continuó Adeline en un tono de exuberante provocación.

Ransom estuvo a punto de responder que no podía pensar en otra manera mejor, pero se mordió la lengua a tiempo; jamás había dirigido, ni siquiera en broma, unas palabras tan crudas a una dama. Solo se sabía cuándo estaba bromeando con una señora por su superabundante galantería.

—Le ruego que me crea que no hay nada que pueda hacer por una dama que no haría por usted —dijo inclinándose por última vez sobre la mano regordeta de la señora

Luna.

—Lo recordaré y se lo exigiré —le gritó ella a sus espaldas mientras él se marchaba.

Pero no obstante este cambio de recíprocas promesas, Ransom consideró que se había librado de ella con bastante facilidad. Caminó lentamente por la Quinta Avenida, a la cual daba la calle de Adeline, bajo la luz de una magnífica luna de invierno; y en cada esquina se detenía un minuto, se sumía en meditaciones y exhalaba vagos y tiernos suspiros. Era ese un modo involuntario e inconsciente de expresar su alivio, igual al de un hombre que cree haber sido atropellado y se da cuenta de que tiene todos los miembros en su sitio. No se preocupó demasiado en pensar qué era lo que lo había salvado; fuese lo que fuera había producido su reacción, así que se sintió bastante avergonzado de haberse sentido tan derrotista en los últimos tiempos. Al llegar a la pensión sus ambiciones y su voluntad estaban de nuevo en pie. Recordó que antes había supuesto que era un hombre inteligente, que nada en especial le había ocurrido para hacerle dudar de eso (la evidencia era solo negativa, no positiva), y que de cualquier manera era lo suficientemente joven como para hacer otra prueba. Esa noche comenzó a silbar antes de acostarse.

XXIII

Tres semanas después estaba apostado frente a la casa de Olive Chancellor, mirando la calle de arriba abajo sin decidirse a nada. Le había dicho a la señora Luna que nada le gustaba tanto como hacer un viaje a Boston; y no era sencillamente porque le gustara por lo que lo había hecho. Estaba en el punto de afirmar que una feliz oportunidad lo había favorecido, pero se me ocurre que uno no está obligado a calificar las oportunidades con adjetivos elogiosos cuando estas han sido esperadas durante tanto tiempo. De cualquier modo la hora más oscura es aquella que precede al alba; y pocos días después de aquella melancólica velada que he descrito, la que Ransom pasó en la cervecería alemana, ante un vaso rápidamente consumido, contemplando su futuro con ojos de amargura, descubrió que el mundo parecía necesitar de sus servicios. La «parte», como él hubiera dicho (no puedo pretender que su lenguaje fuera demasiado heroico en esos casos), que le había encomendado el arreglo de determinados asuntos en Boston hacía tantos meses, y que entonces no había manifestado sino un aprecio muy limitado de sus servicios (había habido entre el abogado y su cliente una diferencia de juicio), al observar, según parece, que habían resultado mucho más fructíferos de lo que se imaginaba, había vuelto a reconsiderar el asunto y por consiguiente le encargó a Ransom que se trasladara nuevamente a la ciudad hermana. La nueva misión requería más tiempo que antes, y durante tres días le prestó una atención constante. El cuarto día advirtió que debía todavía permanecer allí; tendría que esperar hasta la noche… le tenían que preparar unos papeles muy importantes. Se dispuso, pues, a usar ese intervalo como un día de vacaciones, y se preguntó qué podría hacer una persona en Boston para darle un carácter festivo a una mañana libre. El tiempo era lo bastante radiante como para alimentar cualquier ilusión, y comenzó a vagar por las calles en

espera de que alguna se realizara. Se detuvo en el Music Hall y en Tremont Temple, mirando los carteles del vestíbulo. ¿No sería acaso posible que la joven amiga de la señorita Chancellor estuviera dirigiendo en esos momentos un discurso a sus conciudadanos? Su nombre, sin embargo, no figuraba, y ese incidente le pareció una especie de broma a su costa. No conocía a nadie en la ciudad, excepción hecha de Olive Chancellor, pero no se sentía incitado a hacerle una visita. Estaba absolutamente resuelto a no volver a acercársele jamás; indudablemente se trataba de un ser superior, pero lo había tratado con demasiada rudeza como para que él intentara cualquier nueva aproximación. La cortesía, aun la caballerosidad entendida en su sentido más amplio, no exigía nada más de lo que ya él había hecho; el año pasado se había despedido de ella sin decirle que era una arpía, y eso en sí ya era un signo de cortesía bastante elocuente. Por supuesto que se trataba también de Verena Tarrant; no veía la razón de disimular cuando hablaba de ella para sí mismo, y se concedía la distracción de sentir que le gustaría muchísimo verla de nuevo. Lo más probable es que ella no quisiera verlo; la impresión que ella le había producido podía deberse a algún accidente o circunstancia especial; y, de cualquier manera, el encanto que entonces había podido ejercer podía muy bien haber desaparecido por los efectos groseros de la publicidad y la benéfica influencia de su prima. Debe observarse que en este razonamiento de Basil Ransom se reconocía libremente la impresión recibida como un fenómeno que aún perduraba. La atracción podía haberse desvanecido, como él mismo se dijo, pero la imagen mental era todavía muy viva. Lo peor de todo era no poder visitar a Verena (él la llamaba por su nombre en sus pensamientos; era tan bonito), sin tener que visitar a Olive, y Olive era tan desagradable como para situar ese esfuerzo más allá de sus posibilidades. Ransom se hacía otra consideración, del todo masculina: creía que la señorita Chancellor había concebido, en el curso de unas horas, y de una manera que constituía una secuela absurda el hecho de haberlo invitado para conocerlo, tal disgusto, que le resultaría odioso volver a verlo bajo su techo; y él hubiera considerado indelicado aprovecharse de la invitación inicial (antes de haberlo visto), para imponerle una presencia que no tenía ninguna razón para suponer que aquel lapso de tiempo hubiera hecho menos odiosa. No le había mostrado ninguna señal de perdón o de arrepentimiento en ninguna de las tantas pequeñas maneras que conocen las mujeres;

enviándole una nota por medio de su hermana, o un libro, una fotografía, una tarjeta de Navidad, o una revista por correo. En una palabra, Ransom no se sentía en libertad de tocar a su puerta; no sabía qué tipo de acceso le hubiera producido volver a ver su alta figura, y era típico de él querer preservar la sensibilidad de una joven en quien no había encontrado ninguna ternura; siempre estaba dispuesto a perdonar a las mujeres individualmente, aunque estaba firmemente convencido de que era un sexo que en general exigía vigilancia.

No obstante se encontró de pronto, después de hora y media, de pie en el único sitio de Charles Street que para él tenía algún significado. Se le había ocurrido que si no podía visitar a Verena sin tener que visitar a Olive, se vería exento de esa obligación si visitaba a la señora Tarrant. A decir verdad no era la madre quien se lo había pedido, sino la misma joven; y él era consciente, a pesar de su candidez americana, de que una madre era siempre menos accesible, más atenta a los prejuicios sociales, que una hija. Pero su situación era tal que consideró permisible forzar las circunstancias, y comenzó a caminar en dirección hacia donde sabía que se encontraba Cambridge, recordando que en su invitación la señorita Tarrant se había referido a aquel lugar y que la señora Luna se lo había confirmado posteriormente. ¿No había dicho que Verena pasaba a veces varios días en aquel lugar, que su madre había estado enferma y que ella le prodigaba sus cuidados? Entonces no era inconcebible que pudiera encontrarse allá a esa hora (era casi la una) en una de sus expediciones; no era, pues, imposible que pudiera encontrarla en Cambridge. Valía la pena hacer el esfuerzo. Cambridge, además, era un lugar que merecía ser visitado, y resultaba tan bueno como cualquier otro para pasar aquel día de descanso. En ese momento recordó que Cambridge era un lugar muy amplio, y que él carecía de una dirección precisa. Esa reflexión se le presentó justamente cuando pasaba frente a la casa de Olive, pues, aunque parezca extraño, quedaba por fuerza en el camino que había de recorrer para llegar al misterioso suburbio. En parte aquella era la razón por la que estaba allí; por un momento se preguntó si no sería posible tocar el timbre y obtener la deseada información de una de las sirvientas, que seguramente estaría en situación de proporcionársela. Apenas había desechado ese método, de gusto dudoso, cuando oyó que se abría la puerta de la casa, dentro del profundo porche en que están colocados en Charles Street los portones,

ocupados parcialmente por un tramo de escalones protegidos en la cima por una segunda puerta, cuya parte superior, en ambas alas, consiste en un panel de vidrio. Pasó un minuto antes de que pudiera ver quién salía, y en aquel minuto tuvo tiempo de apartarse y luego volver sobre sus pasos y preguntarse cuál de las dos jóvenes aparecería, o si no saldría ninguna, o si lo harían ambas.

La persona que había salido de la casa descendía muy lentamente las escaleras, como si lo hiciera a propósito para darle tiempo de escapar; y cuando al final las puertas de vidrio se separaron, dieron paso a una pequeña anciana. Ransom se sintió defraudado, tal aparición era del todo innecesaria. Pero al minuto siguiente su ánimo volvió a elevarse, porque tenía la seguridad de que había visto antes a aquella ancianita. Esta se detuvo en la acera, y miró vagamente a su alrededor, como si estuviera esperando un ómnibus o un tranvía; tenía un aspecto decaído y descuidado, como si llevara el mismo vestido desde hacía muchos años y aún no se acostumbrara a él; un rostro amplio y benévolo, encerrado tras el cristal de sus lentes, que parecían cubrirlo por entero, y un maletín arrugado y deslucido que le colgaba a un lado como si la fatigase llevarlo. Eso le dio tiempo a Ransom de reconocerla: no conocía en Boston a ninguna persona que se pareciera a aquella, salvo la señorita Birdseye. Su tertulia, su persona, el exaltado relato que la señorita Chancellor le había hecho de ella, habían ocupado un puesto muy destacado en su mente; y mientras ella permanecía allí, en lúgubre introspección, él la consideraba como si fuera una amiga de ayer. La necesidad añadió fuerza a los recuerdos que aquella figura evocaba; solo le llevó un momento considerar que ella podía decirle dónde se encontraba Verena Tarrant a esa hora, y dónde, si era necesario, vivían sus padres. Los ojos de ella se posaron por un momento en él, y cuando vio que la estaba observando no se preocupó (tan completamente había roto con todos los convencionalismos) en apartar la mirada; evidentemente él no representaba para la señorita Birdseye nada, fuera de un ciudadano en pleno uso de sus derechos, y uno de ellos era el de observarla. La modestia de la señorita Birdseye nunca había osado pretender que no podía ser desafiada en público; había tantos nuevos motivos e ideas brillantes en el mundo que podían ser la razón por la que la observaran. Cuando Ransom se le acercó y, quitándose el sombrero, le dijo con una sonrisa en los labios: «¿Quiere usted que detenga ese coche, señorita Birdseye?», ella

solo lo miró más vagamente, en su incapacidad total de aferrarse a la idea de que aquello podía ser sencillamente un reconocimiento de su fama. Había desfilado durante cincuenta años por las calles de Boston, y en ningún período había recibido tantas atenciones de parte de otros jóvenes de ojos negros. Ella se quedó mirando sin prejuicios el gran vehículo de colores que se acercaba a ellos por el camino que conducía a Cambridge.

—Bueno, lo tomaré si es el que me lleva a casa —respondió—. ¿Es el que va al South End?

El conductor había detenido el vehículo a la vista de la señorita Birdseye. Por lo visto la había reconocido como a una pasajera habitual. Al detenerse se limitó a observar:

—Dese prisa en subir, por favor. —Y permaneció con la mano levantada de un modo amenazador, sujetando la cuerda de la campanilla.

—Me concederá usted el honor de acompañarla a su casa, señora; le diré quién soy —dijo Basil Ransom, obedeciendo a una rápida reflexión.

La ayudó a subir al carruaje; el conductor le tendió una mano fraternal y un momento después el joven estaba sentado junto a ella y el estruendo había vuelto a empezar. A aquella hora del día el ómnibus iba casi vacío; prácticamente lo tenían a su entera disposición.

—Bueno, sé que usted es alguien… Pero me parece que no es de aquí —declaró la señorita Birdseye.

—Estuve en su casa en una ocasión… Fue una ocasión muy interesante. ¿Recuerda usted una reunión que convocó hace un año, en el mes de octubre, a la que asistió la señorita Chancellor, y otra joven que pronunció un discurso maravilloso?

—Oh, sí, cuando Verena Tarrant nos conmovió tanto. Había mucha gente; no puedo acordarme de todos.

—Yo era uno de los asistentes —dijo Basil Ransom—, fui allí con la señorita Chancellor, que es mi prima lejana, y usted fue muy bondadosa conmigo.

—¿Qué cosa hice? —preguntó candorosamente la señorita Birdseye. Luego, antes de que pudiera responder, lo reconoció—. Sí, ya me acuerdo de usted. Fue Olive quien lo llevó. Usted es un caballero del Sur… eso me lo dijo después. No aprueba usted

nuestra gran lucha. Quiere usted mantenernos en la opresión. —La vieja señorita hablaba con absoluta dulzura, como si se hubiera deshecho desde hacía mucho tiempo de toda pasión y resentimiento—. Bueno —añadió—, me imagino que no podemos obtener la simpatía de todo el mundo.

—¿No le parece que goza usted de mi simpatía desde el momento en que me subo a este coche para llevarla a su casa, a usted, una de las principales agitadoras? —preguntó Ransom con una sonrisa.

—¿Se subió usted para acompañarme?

—Por supuesto. No soy tan malo como la señorita Chancellor me describe.

—Oh, me imagino que tendrá usted sus ideas —dijo la señorita Birdseye—. Por supuesto que los sureños tienen puntos de vista peculiares. Me imagino que se aferran a ellos más de lo que uno cree. Espero que no se aleje demasiado. Conozco bien mi ruta en Boston.

—No ponga objeciones a mi presencia ni me considere demasiado ceremonioso —respondió Ransom—. Quisiera preguntarle algo.

La señorita Birdseye volvió a mirarlo.

—Claro, ahora lo sitúo; estuvo usted conversando con la doctora Prance.

—¡Para mi gran edificación! —exclamó Ransom—. Espero que la doctora Prance esté bien.

—Ella se preocupa por la salud de todos, menos de la suya —dijo la señorita Birdseye sonriendo—. Cuando se lo digo me responde que no tiene ninguna salud de la que preocuparse. Dice que es la única mujer de Boston que puede prescindir de un médico. Se ha decidido a no ser jamás una paciente, y le parece que el único medio de lograrlo es convertirse en médico. Está tratando de hacerme dormir; esa es su ocupación principal.

—¿Es posible que siga usted sin dormir? —preguntó Ransom, casi con ternura.

—Bah, solo un poco. Pero en el momento que logro conciliar el sueño ya es hora de levantarme. No puedo dormir cuando quiero estar viva.

—Usted debería ir al Sur —le sugirió el joven—. Con aquella dulzura de aire dormiría usted tranquilamente.

—Bueno, no son dulzuras lo que ando buscando —dijo la señorita Birdseye—. Por otra parte ya he estado en el Sur, en los viejos tiempos, y no puedo decir que me hayan dejado dormir mucho; siempre andaban persiguiéndome.

—¿Por causa de los negros?

—Sí, entonces no podía pensar en ninguna otra cosa. Les llevaba la Biblia.

Ransom permaneció en silencio durante un momento; después respondió en un tono que evidentemente era de delicado respeto:

—Me gustaría conocer todo eso.

—Bueno, por fortuna ya no somos necesarias; ahora hay que hacer otras cosas. —Y la señorita Birdseye lo miró con cierto vago y curioso sentido del humor, como si él debiera entender a qué cosas aludía.

—Se refiere usted a las otras esclavas —exclamó con una sonrisa—. Puede usted llevarles todas las Biblias que quiera.

—Quiero llevarles la ley. Esa debe ser ahora nuestra Biblia.

Ransom advirtió que le gustaba mucho la señorita Birdseye, y sin ninguna hipocresía ni un uso excesivo de la cortesía protocolaria que había en su lenguaje le dijo:

—Dondequiera que vaya, señora, poco importará lo que usted lleve. Usted llevará consigo siempre su bondad.

Por un minuto ella no respondió. Luego murmuró:

—Olive me dijo que usted siempre se expresaba de ese modo.

—Me temo que no le haya hablado bien de mí.

—Bueno, estoy segura de que ella cree tener la razón.

—¿Lo cree? —dijo Ransom—. ¡Nada de eso! Lo afirma con certidumbre absoluta. A propósito, espero que esté bien.

La señorita Birdseye volvió nuevamente a mirarlo.

—¿No la ha visto? ¿No ha ido a visitarla?

—Oh, no, no he ido de visita. Pasaba solo frente a su casa cuando me encontré con usted.

—Tal vez viva usted ahora aquí —dijo la señorita Birdseye. Y cuando él le rectificó esa impresión, añadió, con un tono que demostraba la absoluta confianza que él le inspiraba—: ¿No sería mejor que pasara a saludarla?

—Estoy seguro de que no le ocasionaría ningún placer a la señorita Chancellor —respondió Basil Ransom—. Me considera un enemigo total.

—Olive es muy valiente.

—Precisamente. Y yo soy muy tímido.

—¿No combatió usted en una ocasión?

—Sí, pero aquella era una noble causa.

Ransom había hecho en broma aquella alusión a la gran Secesión y, por analogía, a la actitud del hombre que opone resistencia; pero la señorita Birdseye la tomó en cambio muy en serio, y permaneció sentada durante largo rato en absoluta mudez, como si quisiera demostrar con su silencio que ya había tenido bastantes experiencias como para discutir en esos momentos las conveniencias de la última rebelión. El joven advirtió que la había hecho callar y se sintió muy afligido, ya que, a pesar de todo el respeto desinteresado de un sureño hacia una mujer desprotegida, lo que le había hecho subirse al ómnibus con ella era precisamente el deseo de hacerla hablar. Deseaba tener noticias tanto generales como particulares de Verena Tarrant; era un tema sobre el que deseaba que la señorita Birdseye manifestara su opinión. Prefirió no ser él quien tocara primero ese punto, y esperó a que se presentara otra oportunidad. Al final, cuando estaba a punto de comprometerse con una pregunta directa (pensó que de cualquier manera no hubiera logrado estar allí mucho rato sin comprometerse), ella se le anticipó diciendo, de un modo que demostraba cómo había seguido el mismo curso de pensamiento.

—¡Me asombra que la señorita Tarrant no haya podido impresionarlo en aquella ocasión!

—¡Por supuesto que lo logró! —dijo Ransom inmediatamente—. Me pareció encantadora.

—¿No la encuentra usted muy lúcida?

—¡Dios nos libre, señora! Yo sostengo que las mujeres no tienen ninguna necesidad de ser lúcidas.

Su acompañante se volvió hacia él, lentamente, con su aire sumiso, y cada uno de sus lentes, en aquella actitud de reproche, tuvo el brillo de una enorme lágrima.

—¿Nos considera usted, entonces, sencillamente como juguetes encantadores?

El efecto de esta pregunta, por proceder de la señorita Birdseye y referirse en cierto modo a su propia venerable persona, fue tal que Ransom estuvo a punto de soltar una carcajada. Pero logró controlarse a tiempo para decir con expresión de autenticidad:

—Las considero a ustedes como la cosa más preciosa que existe en este mundo; la única por la que vale la pena vivir.

—Para ustedes vale la pena vivir. Pero ¿para nosotras? —sugirió la señorita Birdseye.

—Vale la pena para toda mujer mientras sea admirada como yo la admiro a usted. La señorita Tarrant, de quien estábamos hablando, me impresionó, como usted dice, de esta manera, pues ahora pienso en muchos mejores términos del sexo que produjo a una joven tan deliciosa.

—Bueno, aquí en Boston tenemos una gran opinión de ella —dijo la señorita Birdseye—. Parece que realmente posee un don.

—¿Habla a menudo? Quiero decir, ¿hay alguna oportunidad de que pueda yo oírla?

—Ha elevado su voz algunas veces en lugares de los alrededores, como en Framingham y Billerica. Parece que esté acumulando fuerzas para irrumpir en Boston como una gran ola. De hecho, ya lo hizo el verano pasado. Pero sigue adquiriendo fuerzas desde que tuvo su gran éxito en la convención.

—¿Ah, sí? ¿De modo que fue muy grande su éxito en la convención? —preguntó Ransom, tratando de que su voz se mantuviera en un timbre discreto.

La señorita Birdseye dudó un momento antes de responder, para darle a sus palabras la justa delimitación de un discurso honesto.

—Bueno —dijo, enternecida por una larga visión retrospectiva—, no he visto nada semejante desde que escuché a Eliza P. Moseley.

—¡Qué lástima que no hable en ninguna parte esta noche! —exclamó Ransom.

—Oh, esta noche estará en Cambridge. Me lo ha dicho Olive Chancellor.

—¿Pronunciará allí algún discurso?

—No, ha ido a su casa.

—Pensé que estaba viviendo en Charles Street.

—Sí, esa es su residencia, su residencia principal, ya que vive muy unida a la prima de usted. ¿No es su prima la señorita Chancellor?

—No nos aferramos demasiado a ese parentesco —dijo Ransom, sonriendo—. ¿Están muy unidas ambas jóvenes?

—Usted se podría dar cuenta si observase a la señorita Chancellor cuando Verena se entrega a la elocuencia. Es como si alguien tocara las cuerdas de su corazón. Parece vibrar con el eco de cada palabra. Es una amistad muy íntima y muy hermosa, y nosotras les deseamos todo el bien posible. ¡Ambas trabajarán juntas por una gran causa!

—Así lo espero —comentó Ransom—. Pero no obstante dice usted que la señorita Tarrant pasa buena parte del tiempo con sus padres.

—Sí, parece que siente mucho afecto por ellos. Si la viera usted en su casa, diría que es una hija perfecta. ¡La vida que lleva es encantadora! —exclamó la señorita Birdseye.

—¿Si la viera yo en su casa? ¡Eso es precisamente lo que deseo! —replicó Ransom, sintiendo que si quería llegar a ese punto, no debía tener demasiados escrúpulos—. No he olvidado que cuando la conocí me invitó a visitarla.

—Por supuesto que atrae a muchos visitantes —dijo la señorita Birdseye, limitando todo su aliento a esa declaración.

—Sí, debe de estar acostumbrada a que la admiren. ¿En qué parte de Cambridge vive su familia?

—Ay, es una de esas callejuelas que ni siquiera parecen tener nombre. Pero la llaman… la llaman… —meditaba en voz alta.

Aquel proceso fue interrumpido por una abrupta intervención del conductor:

—Supongo que aquí cambiará usted de línea. Debe tomar uno de los tranvías azules.

La buena mujer volvió de pronto a la realidad, y Ransom la ayudó a bajar del vehículo, con el auxilio, como antes, del fuerte brazo del conductor. El camino se bifurcaba hacia la derecha, y ella tuvo que esperar en la esquina de la calle debido a que no había ningún tranvía azul a la vista. La esquina estaba desierta y el día se prestaba a la espera, un día nada gris, sino intensamente radiante. Parecía que la brisa misma llevase guantes y los colores de la calle tuvieran la riqueza de tonos de un deshielo incipiente. Ransom, como es natural, esperó con su filantrópica acompañante, aunque ahora ella protestaba más vigorosamente contra la idea de que un caballero del

Sur pretendiera descubrirle a una vieja abolicionista los misterios de Boston. Él prometió dejarla tan pronto como la depositara en el tranvía azul; y entretanto estuvieron de pie bajo el sol, de espaldas al escaparate de una farmacia. Ella trataba, a petición del joven, de recordar el nombre de la calle del doctor Tarrant.

—Me imagino que si pregunta por el doctor Tarrant cualquier persona se lo podrá decir —dijo; y en aquel momento, recordó súbitamente la dirección del curandero mesmeriano: estaba situada en Monadnoc Place.

—Pero tendrá que preguntar dónde queda ese lugar; de manera que será lo mismo —continuó. Después de esto añadió, en un tono de mayor cordialidad—: ¿No irá usted también a visitar a su prima?

—No, si puedo evitarlo.

La señorita Birdseye emitió un pequeño suspiro de impotencia.

—Bueno, me imagino que todo el mundo debe actuar de acuerdo con sus ideas. Eso es lo que hace Olive Chancellor. Tiene un carácter muy noble.

—Ya lo creo, un temperamento formidable.

—Usted sabe que las opiniones de ellas son exactamente las mismas; me refiero a ella y a Verena —continuó tranquilamente la señorita Birdseye—. ¿Por qué pretende entonces establecer diferencias?

—Mi querida señorita Birdseye, ¿es que acaso una mujer consiste solo en sus opiniones? Yo prefiero, para comenzar, la cara encantadora de la señorita Tarrant.

—Sí, es cierto que es bonita. —Y la señorita Birdseye emitió otro suspiro, como si le hubieran impuesto una teoría, referente a las opiniones de una dama, la cual, con todo lo que de desacostumbrado y extraño entrañaba, ella era demasiado anciana para poder juzgar. Tal vez por primera vez sintió el peso de la edad—. Ahí viene un tranvía azul —dijo en un tono de suave alivio.

—Tardará un poco para que llegue acá. Además, yo no creo que aquellas sean en realidad las opiniones de la señorita Tarrant —añadió Ransom.

—No debe usted pensar que no las sostenga con firmeza —exclamó su compañera con cierto brío—. Si cree que no es sincera está usted muy equivocado. Esas ideas constituyen su vida.

—Bueno, ella podrá entonces convencerme —dijo Ransom con una sonrisa.

La señorita Birdseye no hacía sino observar su tranvía azul, cuyo tránsito por el momento había sido detenido. En cierto momento ella se le quedó mirando con solemnidad desde detrás de sus cristales.

—Sí, no me extrañaría que lo lograra. Eso estaría muy bien. No me imagino que no logre estremecerlo. Ha producido ya ese efecto en muchas personas.

—Comprendo; no me cabe duda de que lo producirá también en mí. —Y después de un momento se le ocurrió añadir—: Por cierto, señorita Birdseye, tal vez querrá usted ser tan bondadosa de no mencionarle este encuentro a mi prima, en caso de que la vuelva usted a ver. Tengo la conciencia absolutamente tranquila por no visitarla, pero no me gustaría que creyera que voy anunciando esta intención por toda la ciudad. No me gustaría ofenderla, y sería mejor que no supiera que he estado en Boston. Si usted no se lo dice, nadie más lo hará.

—¿Quiere usted que le oculte…? —murmuró la señorita Birdseye, ligeramente jadeante.

—No, no quiero que le oculte nada. Solo quiero que deje pasar en silencio este incidente… que no le diga nada.

—Bueno, jamás he hecho nada por el estilo.

—¿Por qué estilo? —Ransom se sentía un poco contrariado, y un poco conmovido por la incapacidad que ella mostraba para entender sus puntos de vista, y aquella resistencia le hizo sostener con mayor fuerza sus ideas—. Lo que le pido es muy sencillo. Usted no tiene ninguna obligación de comunicarle a la señorita Chancellor todo lo que le ocurre, ¿no es verdad?

La petición parecía violentar todavía más el candor de la pobre anciana.

—La verdad es que yo la veo muy a menudo, y conversamos de todo… Y además, ¿no se lo irá a decir Verena?

—También he pensado en eso, pero espero que no.

—Ella se lo cuenta todo. Su unión es muy estrecha.

—No querrá herirla —dijo Ransom astutamente.

—Por lo que veo es usted muy considerado. —Y la señorita Birdseye continuó observándolo—. Es una lástima que no simpatice con nuestro movimiento.

—Como le he dicho, tal vez la señorita Tarrant logre convencerme. Tiene usted enfrente a un posible converso —continuó Ransom, sin rogar al cielo, según me temo, que su deshonestidad fuera perdonada.

—Me haría muy feliz saberlo… después de haberle dado en secreto su dirección. —Una sonrisa de infinita mansedumbre iluminó el rostro de la señorita Birdseye, quien después añadió—: Bueno, me imagino que esa será su suerte. Ella ya ha logrado convencer a muchos. Yo permanecería en silencio si eso ocurriera. Sí, tengo la seguridad de que ella logrará convertirlo.

—Se lo haré saber tan pronto como ella lo consiga —dijo Basil Ransom—. Mire, aquí está ya el tranvía.

—Creo en que la verdad terminará por triunfar. No le diré nada a nadie. —Y permitió que el joven la ayudara a subir al vehículo, detenido ahora en la esquina.

—Espero poder verla de nuevo —dijo él mientras se despedían.

—Estoy siempre moviéndome por las calles de Boston. —Y mientras él la levantaba casi en vilo para depositarla en la plataforma de aquel recinto rectangular, ella se volvió hacia él y le dijo:

—¡La muchacha influirá en usted! Si ese ha de ser su secreto, lo mantendré.

Ransom se quitó el sombrero y la saludó agitando un brazo, pero ella había dejado de verlo; se abría paso en el vehículo que esa vez estaba completamente lleno, sin un solo sitio vacío donde pudiera sentarse. Pero él se dijo que con seguridad cualquier hombre le ofrecería su asiento a aquella inocente y encantadora anciana.

XXIV

Una hora después, o poco más, Ransom se hallaba en el saloncito de la residencia del doctor Tarrant en Monadnoc Place. Había convencido a una joven sirvienta, con apasionada solicitud, de que anunciara a las damas su presencia; y ella había vuelto, después de una larga ausencia, para decirle que la señorita Tarrant bajaría dentro de poco. Ransom se apoderó, de acuerdo con su costumbre, del primer libro que encontró a mano (estaba sobre la mesa, junto a una vieja revista y una bandeja de estilo japonés que contenía las tarjetas de visita de Tarrant, con la especificación de doctor mesmeriano), y pasó unos diez minutos hojeándolo. Se trataba de una biografía de Ada T. P. Foat, la célebre médium, y estaba adornado con un retrato de la dama con una expresión de sorpresa e innumerables ricitos. Ransom se dijo, después de leer algunas páginas, que siempre se había ridiculizado la literatura del Sur; ¡pero si aquello era un ejemplo brillante de la del Norte…! Y arrojó el libro sobre la mesa despectivamente, como si no supiera bien, después de haber vivido tanto tiempo en el Norte, que este no lo era, mientras se preguntaba a la vez si ese era el tipo de cosas con que la señorita Chancellor se cultivaba. No había otro libro a la vista, y había leído ya aquella revista; así que definitivamente no tenía nada que hacer, mientras los ocupantes de la casa no se dignaran aparecer, más que permanecer inmóvil en aquel luminoso, desnudo y pequeño cuarto, tan caluroso que sintió deseos de abrir una ventana, a través de la cual una fea e invasora luz oblicua parecía decidida a revelar la pobreza del lugar. Ransom, como ya he dicho, no tenía un gran conocimiento del lujo, y por lo general no observaba cómo estaban amuebladas las casas pobres; solo se daba cuenta cuando aquellas eran muy hermosas; pero lo que pudo ver mientras esperaba en la del doctor Tarrant le hizo decirse que no era ninguna maravilla que Verena prefiriera vivir en la casa de Olive

Chancellor. Hasta llegó a preguntarse si no sería debido a aquella elegancia superior por lo que cultivaba la amistad de la señorita Chancellor, y si la señora Luna no tendría razón cuando pensaba que se trataba de una joven mercenaria e insincera. Pasaron tantos minutos antes de que ella apareciera que tuvo tiempo de recordar que en realidad él no sabía nada que pudiera desmentir aquella hipótesis, así como lo extraño que era (extrañísimo, si se pensaba bien) que hubiera ido a Cambridge para verla, cuando solo tenía a su disposición unas cuantas horas libres en Boston, sencillamente en respuesta a una invitación ocasional hecha hacía año y medio. De cualquier manera no se había negado a recibirlo; y estaba en libertad de hacerlo si no le agradaba su presencia. Y no solo eso; era evidente que se estaba arreglando en su honor, ya que el joven oía rápidos pasos de un lado a otro por encima de su cabeza, así como a través de la modesta tarima que en Monadnoc Place separaba ambos pisos, el sonido de cajones y gavetas que se abrían y se cerraban. Al fin, las escaleras crujieron bajo un paso ligero y un instante después una radiante figura hizo su aparición en la sala.

Recordaba que era muy bonita; pero ahora, que se había cultivado y desarrollado, la pequeña profetisa le pareció todavía más hermosa. Su espléndida cabellera parecía refulgir; la dulce curva de las mejillas y del mentón lo asombró por su delicadeza; sus ojos y labios estaban llenos de sonrisas y saludos. La muchacha le había parecido antes un ser luminoso; pero ahora parecía que iluminaba el lugar, que irradiaba luz, que convertía en algo sin importancia todo lo que la rodeaba; se dejó caer en el destartalado sofá con un efecto tan encantador como si hubiera sido una ninfa que se tendiera sobre una piel de leopardo, forzando a Basil, con el encanto natural de su voz, a permanecer en silencio hasta que no volvió a hablar. Basil no tardó mucho en advertir que ese lustre recientemente adquirido era simplemente un resultado del éxito: Verena era aún joven y delicada, pero el sonido de los aplausos de un público numeroso había llegado a sus oídos y constituía ahora un elemento sobre el cual tenía la sensación de columpiarse. Sin embargo, su mirada se mantenía pura y directa y conservaba aún a su alrededor aquel fantástico encanto que tanto lo había impresionado, y que le hacía pensar en lugares celestiales —no habría sabido decir dónde—, en claustros conventuales o valles arcádicos. La primera vez la había visto cubierta de colores y lazos, y aún ahora tenía el aire de estar disfrazada, solo que el disfraz era más rico y

refinado. Aquel era su estilo, su modo de expresarse físicamente, su personalidad. Si en casa de la señorita Birdseye y después, en Charles Street, había podido confundirla con una bailarina sobre la cuerda floja, ahora transformaba la pequeña salita de Monadnoc Place en un «escenario», un escenario como el que una *prima donna* puede lograr por medio de telones pintados y tablones polvorientos. Se dirigió a Basil Ransom como si lo hubiera visto la semana anterior y como si recordara perfectamente sus cualidades, aunque le permitió explicarle, con aquel modo bastante ceremonioso que lo caracterizaba, mientras ella sonreía sentada, por qué se había permitido presentarse en su casa, a pesar de que apenas la conocía, y en gracia a una invitación hecha hacía tanto tiempo que muy bien la hubiera podido olvidar. La explicación distó mucho de resultar satisfactoria; la única razón importante consistía en que había deseado verla. Se dio cuenta de que podía resultar muy difícil de expresar esta razón, y que la sonrisa atenta de la muchacha, a pesar de ser inocente y arcádica, parecía acusarlo de no tener el valor de expresar sus sentimientos. Él había aludido especialmente a su encuentro en casa de la señorita Chancellor; allí era donde ella le había dicho que le agradaría recibirlo en su casa.

—Lo recuerdo perfectamente, y también recuerdo muy bien haberlo visto la noche anterior en casa de la señorita Birdseye. Pronuncié un discurso en aquella ocasión. ¿No lo recuerda? Fue algo verdaderamente delicioso.

—En efecto, fue delicioso —dijo Basil Ransom.

—No me refiero a mi discurso, sino a la reunión. Fue entonces cuando conocí a la señorita Chancellor. No sé si sabe usted que trabajamos juntas. Se ha preocupado mucho por mí.

—¿Sigue usted pronunciando aún discursos? —le preguntó Ransom, consciente, tan pronto como había hecho la pregunta, de su inoportunidad.

—¿Aún? ¡Vamos! Espero seguir pronunciándolos. Es lo único que sé hacer bien. Esa es mi vida… o lo va a ser. Y también la de la señorita Chancellor. Estamos decididas a hacer algo.

—¿Y también ella pronuncia discursos?

—No; ella hace los míos, o una buena parte de ellos. Me indica lo que debo decir, las cosas importantes, los puntos decisivos. Los discursos son tanto de la señorita

Chancellor como míos —dijo aquella muchacha excepcional con una complacencia tan absoluta que no dejaba de tener algo de cómico.

—Me gustaría mucho poder volver a escucharla —añadió Basil Ransom.

—Sí, debe venir una de estas noches. No le faltarán oportunidades. Paseamos de triunfo en triunfo.

Su vivacidad, su seguridad, su expresión de personaje público, la mezcla de juventud y de ponderación, asombraban y confundían a su visitante; intuyó que si había ido a apagar su curiosidad corría el riesgo de salir de allí con la curiosidad más despierta que satisfecha. La joven añadió con su tono alegre, cordial y confiado, el tono que facilita una conversación, el tono en que las doncellas felices, coronadas de flores, pudieron haber hablado a jóvenes de piel dorada en la Edad de Oro:

—Su nombre me resulta familiar. La señorita Chancellor me lo ha dicho todo con respecto a usted.

—¿Se lo ha dicho todo? —Ransom frunció sus cejas oscuras—. ¿Cómo ha podido hacer eso? ¡Ella no me conoce en absoluto!

—Bueno, me ha dicho que es usted un gran enemigo de nuestro movimiento. ¿No es cierto? Creo que usted expresó algunas ideas poco favorables el día que le conocí en la casa de la señorita Chancellor.

—Si me considera usted un enemigo, entonces es demasiado bondadosa al recibirme.

—¡Oh, muchos caballeros vienen a verme! —dijo Verena, tranquila y vivazmente—. Algunos vienen solo por curiosidad. Otros porque han oído hablar de mí, o han estado presentes en alguna ocasión en que he hablado y mis palabras los han convencido. Todos ellos han mostrado gran interés.

—Sé que ha estado usted en Europa —observó Ransom después de un momento.

—Sí, sí, fuimos a ver si allá nos han superado. Pasamos una temporada excelente; conocimos a todas las dirigentes.

—¿Las dirigentes? —preguntó Ransom.

—Las dirigentes de la emancipación de nuestro sexo. Allá también hay caballeros al lado de las mujeres. Olive tuvo una espléndida acogida en todos los países, y pudimos conversar con la gente más seria. Hemos recogido muchas experiencias. ¡Y en cuanto a Europa…! —La joven hizo una pausa, y concluyó con un suspiro feliz y una sonrisa su

discurso, como si hubiera mucho más que decir de lo que podía permitirse en una breve visita.

—Me imagino que es muy agradable —dijo Ransom, alentándola.

—¡Es sencillamente un sueño!

—¿Y cree que el movimiento ha avanzado más allá que aquí?

—Bueno, la señorita Chancellor piensa que así es. Se quedó muy sorprendida de algunas cosas que pudimos observar, y concluyó que tal vez no les había hecho la debida justicia a los europeos; tienen una mente tan abierta y tan amplia como el mar; mientras que yo me inclino a pensar que, en términos generales, nosotras estamos mejor. La situación del movimiento en Europa refleja su cultura general, y su cultura general es más alta que la nuestra (estoy utilizando el término en su más amplio sentido). Por otra parte, si se considera la condición especial, moral, social y personal de nuestro sexo, me parece superior en este país; quiero decir en relación, en proporción si así puede decirse, con la fase social en general. Debo añadir que hemos visto allá casos notables. En Inglaterra pudimos conocer a algunas mujeres encantadoras, de amplia cultura y con una admirable capacidad organizativa. En Francia encontramos personalidades maravillosas, entusiasmantes; pasamos una tarde deliciosa con la célebre Marie Verneuil; había salido de la cárcel, sabe usted, hacía apenas unas cuantas semanas. Nuestra impresión general es que se trata solo de tiempo, el futuro es nuestro. Pero en todas partes pudimos escuchar el mismo grito: ¿hasta cuándo, Señor, hasta cuándo?

Basil Ransom escuchó estas declaraciones con un sentimiento que cristalizaba en una necesidad de reír refrenada solo por el temor de perder algo del discurso. Había en efecto algo amablemente cómico en ver a aquella bonita muchacha sentada ahí y responderle a una casual pregunta de cortesía con un flujo oratorio como si fuera la cosa más normal del mundo. ¿Se habría olvidado acaso de dónde se encontraban y creía estar ante una multitud? Usaba las mismas inflexiones y cadencias, casi los mismos gestos, que si estuviera en una tribuna; y lo más extraño de todo era que, a pesar de aquel estilo, no resultaba antipática. No era detestable sino encantadora; no era dogmática sino genial. ¿Cómo asombrarse de que hubiera triunfado si pronunciaba discursos con la misma naturalidad con que un pájaro canta? Ransom podía ver, además

de la naturalidad con que se expresaba, cómo el estilo oratorio era lo que por educación, y por costumbre, le resultaba más familiar. Realmente no sabía cómo juzgarla; era un prodigio juvenil que causaba estupefacción. Le volvió de nuevo a la memoria su primer contacto con ella en casa de la señorita Birdseye; le pareció que ahora le faltaba el elemento de frescura que en aquella ocasión tanto lo había impresionado. Después de un breve silencio que siguió al fin del discurso de la joven, Ransom advirtió que la expresión de su cara debía ser humorística. Cambió de posición, y dijo lo primero que se le ocurrió:

—Me imagino que ahora se presenta usted sin su padre.

—¿Sin mi padre?

—Sí, sin que él tenga que producirle algún estímulo psíquico como en aquella ocasión.

—Ah, ya veo, creía usted que había comenzado una conferencia. —Y soltó una risa alegre—. En efecto me han dicho que hablo en público como lo hago en privado y me imagino que también sucede a la inversa. Pero entonces no me pregunte qué fue lo que vi y oí en Europa. Ese será el tema de una conferencia que estoy preparando. Sí, ahora ya no dependo de mi padre —continuó, mientras el sentimiento de Ransom de haber dicho algo demasiado sarcástico se hacía más profundo ante la perfecta indiferencia que la joven mostró—. Sus pacientes le absorben ahora demasiado tiempo. Pero se lo debo todo; de no haber sido por él, nadie hubiera descubierto que yo poseía un don… tal vez ni siquiera yo misma. Él se encargó de lanzarme, y ahora yo puedo proseguir el camino sola.

—Lo prosigue usted muy hermosamente —dijo Ransom, consciente de que debía decirle algo agradable y que fuera también respetuoso y tierno, pero preocupado por el hecho de que todo lo que pudiera decir pareciera una mofa.

Verena, sin embargo, no mostraba ningún resentimiento, ya que en determinado momento le dijo, apenas se acordó, del modo en que una persona trata de remediar una omisión involuntaria:

—Ha sido muy amable de su parte venir hasta aquí.

Esta era una de esas expresiones que no resultaba prudente dirigirle a Ransom; nunca se podía prever qué respuesta sería capaz de provocar.

—¿Considera usted que un viaje, cualquiera que sea, pueda resultarme demasiado largo o fatigoso cuando se trata de obtener un placer tan grande? —En esta ocasión la respuesta no pasó de allí.

—Bueno, la gente ha venido de otras ciudades —respondió Verena, no con falsa humildad sino con falso orgullo—. ¿Conoce usted Cambridge?

—Esta es la primera vez que estoy aquí.

—Pero me imagino que ha oído hablar usted de su universidad; es muy famosa.

—Sí… aun en Mississippi. Me imagino que debe ser excelente.

—También yo lo creo —dijo Verena—, pero no podrá usted suponer que hable con demasiada admiración de una institución que cierra las puertas a nuestro sexo.

—¿Aboga usted por un sistema de educación mixta?

—Abogo por la igualdad de derechos, la igualdad de oportunidades, la igualdad de privilegios. Lo mismo que la señorita Chancellor —añadió Verena, con una perceptible sensación de que su proclama necesitaba un apoyo.

—Oh, yo pensaba que lo que ella se proponía era solo erigir una desigualdad distinta… es decir, la absoluta exclusión de los hombres —dijo Ransom.

—Ella considera que debemos hacer grandes ajustes. Yo a veces le digo que lo que desea no es simple justicia sino venganza. Y me parece que lo admite —continuó Verena con cierta solemnidad. Aquel tema, sin embargo, solo le interesó por un momento y, antes de que Basil Ransom tuviera oportunidad para hacer algún comentario, la joven prosiguió con un tono distinto—: ¿No me va a decir que ahora vive en Mississippi? La señorita Chancellor me dijo, en la otra ocasión en que estuvo usted en Boston, que se había instalado en Nueva York.

—Ella insistía en hablar de cosas que hacían referencia a Ransom, y cuando este le confirmó que, en efecto, se había instalado en Nueva York, ella le preguntó si había abandonado definitivamente el Sur.

—¿Abandonar a mi pobre, querido y desolado viejo Sur? ¡Dios no lo permita! —exclamó Basil Ransom.

Ella lo miró durante un momento con mayor ternura.

—Me parece natural —dijo— que ame usted su hogar. Pero me temo que pueda dudar que yo ame el mío. En los últimos tiempos he estado aquí tan poco tiempo. La

señorita Chancellor me ha absorbido, de eso no me cabe duda. Pero es una lástima que no haya estado hoy a su lado.

Ransom no respondió nada; se sentía incapaz de decirle a la señorita Tarrant que si así hubiera sido, él no la habría visitado. No es que fuera incapaz de hipocresía, ya que cuando ella le preguntó si no había visto a su prima la noche anterior, y él respondió que en efecto no la había visto, ella exclamó con un candor que la hizo ruborizarse un momento después:

—Ah, ¡no querrá usted decir que no la ha perdonado!

A lo cual Basil adoptó una expresión de inocencia capaz de desarmar a cualquiera y dijo:

—¿Perdonarla, por qué?

Verena respondió, con la cara encendida:

—Bueno, pude ver cómo se sintió ella aquella vez en su casa.

—¿Qué fue lo que sintió? —preguntó Basil Ransom con el tono provocador natural de un hombre.

No sé si Verena se sintió provocada, lo cierto es que respondió con más vehemencia que lógica:

—Bueno, sabe muy bien que usted habló despectivamente de nosotras. ¡Y en qué términos! Pude ver cómo aquello afectó a Olive. ¿No tiene usted intención de ir a visitarla?

—Debo pensarlo; estoy aquí solo desde hace tres o cuatro días —dijo Ransom, sonriendo de la manera en que los hombres sonríen cuando no quieren dar mayores explicaciones.

Es muy posible que Verena se hubiera sentido provocada, aun cuando en general su temperamento era poco propicio a la irritación, ya que un momento después añadió, y con un aire ligeramente deliberado:

—Tal vez sea mejor que no vaya, si después de todo no ha cambiado.

—La verdad es que no he cambiado —dijo el joven, aún sonriendo, con los codos apoyados en los brazos de su silla, los hombros un poco inclinados hacia delante, y sus delgadas y oscuras manos entrelazadas enfrente de él.

—Por lo que a mí respecta, he recibido visitas de personas que sostenían puntos de vista opuestos a los míos —anunció Verena, como si aquella noticia no pudiera turbarla. Luego añadió—: ¿Cómo supo entonces que vivía yo aquí?

—Me lo dijo la señorita Birdseye.

—¡Me alegra mucho que haya ido a visitarla! —exclamó la muchacha, volviendo a hablar con la impetuosidad de antes.

—No es que haya ido a visitarla. La he encontrado por la calle precisamente cuando salía de casa de la señorita Chancellor. Pasaba yo por ahí porque sabía que era el camino más corto para venir del centro a Cambridge, y de todos modos me había propuesto venir a verla, entregándome al azar.

—¿Al azar?

—Sí; la señora Luna, en Nueva York, me dijo que algunas veces venía usted por aquí, y yo quería, de algún modo, volver a verla.

Puede decírsele al lector que Verena se sintió muy halagada de que su visitante hubiera hecho aquella ardua peregrinación (pues era consciente de cómo la gente en Boston se lo pensaba antes de decidirse a hacer un viaje a aquel suburbio académico) solo con una vaga perspectiva de éxito; pero su placer se mezclaba con otros sentimientos, o, por lo menos con la conciencia de que toda la situación era bastante más compleja de lo que habían sido hasta entonces los elementos de su vida. Había como un germen de desorden en aquella distinción rencorosa que el señor Ransom había establecido repentinamente entre Olive Chancellor, con quien lo unían lazos de sangre, y ella, con quien ningún lazo le unía. Conocía muy bien a Olive ya para entonces como para desear no revelarle el incidente, y sin embargo le hubiera parecido del todo novedoso ocultar un episodio de tanta importancia como era el haber pasado una hora en compañía del señor Ransom durante una visita relámpago que aquel había hecho a Boston. Había pasado horas al lado de otros caballeros a quienes Olive no conocía; pero aquello era diferente, porque su amiga sabía que los recibía y eran personas que no le importaban nada. Bueno, no le importaban, digamos, lo que le hubiera importado este caso. Porque Verena tenía la seguridad de que en este caso Olive se habría preocupado. Ella le había hablado del señor Burrage y del señor

Pardon, y hasta de algunos caballeros en Europa, y en cambio no le había hablado (fuera de los primeros días, y de eso hacía ya año y medio) del señor Ransom.

No obstante Verena tenía razones para desear tanto que el joven fuera a ver a Olive como que se mantuviera alejado de ella; el sentimiento de responsabilidad de ocultar el hecho de que el joven no se había mantenido alejado era mayor, tal vez, a la luz de otro hecho, y era sencillamente que le gustaba ver al señor Ransom. Se acordaba perfectamente de él después de sus dos únicos encuentros anteriores, a pesar de que los contactos habían sido de lo más superficial; en algunos momentos había pensado en él y se preguntaba si le gustaría cuando lo conociera mejor. Ahora, después de solo veinte minutos, lo conocía mejor, y lo encontraba, aunque un poco extraño, muy agradable. De cualquier manera ahí estaba, y ella no deseaba que su visita se arruinara por el desagradable pensamiento de las consecuencias. Levantó la mirada al oír pronunciar el nombre de la señora Luna: pareció aliviarla un poco.

—Oh, sí, la señora Luna, ¿no es verdad que es una mujer fascinante?

Ransom dudó por un momento.

—La verdad es que no. No creo que lo sea.

—A usted debería gustarle; también ella detesta nuestro movimiento.

Y Verena comenzó a dirigirle numerosas preguntas sobre la brillante Adeline; si la veía con frecuencia, si era admirada en Nueva York, si la encontraba muy atractiva. Él respondía con la mayor habilidad posible, pero pronto se hizo la reflexión de que no había ido a Monadnoc Place para hablar de la señora Luna; y por ello, para cambiar de tema (y a la vez para cumplir con un deber social), comenzó a hablar de los padres de la muchacha, expresó su pesar al enterarse de los males de la señora Tarrant y el temor de no poder tener la satisfacción de saludarla.

—Ya está bastante mejor —dijo Verena—, pero sigue en cama. Se dedica a reposar cuando no tiene nada que hacer. Mamá es muy especial —añadió—, cuando está bien y se siente satisfecha se mete en cama, y en cambio cuando se encuentra mal se mueve y se agita por toda la casa. Cuando la oiga usted subir y bajar las escaleras puede estar seguro de que se encuentra muy mal. Le interesará mucho saber noticias de usted.

Ransom miró su reloj.

—Espero no haber permanecido demasiado tiempo. No me gustaría haberla sustraído de sus obligaciones filiales.

—Oh, no. A ella le encanta recibir visitas aunque no pueda atenderlas personalmente. Si no le llevara tanto tiempo levantarse y vestirse ya hubiera bajado. Me imagino que piensa usted que ella me ha echado mucho de menos desde que he estado tan absorbida por el trabajo. Y así ha sido, pero sabe que todo esto es por mi bien. Sería capaz de hacer cualquier sacrificio por amor.

Y a Ransom en ese momento se le ocurrió preguntarle:

—¿Y usted? ¿Haría usted alguno?

Verena lo miró con los ojos brillantes.

—¿Cualquier sacrificio por amor? —Se quedó pensativa durante un momento y luego dijo—: No creo tener el derecho de afirmarlo, porque nunca se me ha exigido ninguno. Ni siquiera recuerdo haber hecho algún sacrificio… por lo menos ninguno importante.

—¡Dioses! ¡Su vida debe de ser enteramente feliz!

—He sido muy afortunada, eso lo sé. No sé qué hacer cuando pienso cómo algunas mujeres, la mayor parte de las mujeres, sufren. Pero no voy a hablarle de eso —dijo con una sonrisa incipiente—. ¡Si se opone usted a nuestro movimiento, no tendrá ninguna gana de oír hablar del sufrimiento de las mujeres!

—El sufrimiento de las mujeres es el sufrimiento de toda la humanidad —respondió Ransom—. ¿Cree usted que va a haber algún movimiento capaz de detenerlo, o todas las conferencias que se pueden dictar de aquí al día del juicio final? Hemos nacido para sufrir… y para soportar ese sufrimiento, como gente decente.

—¡Oh, adoro el heroísmo! —le interrumpió Verena.

—Y en cuanto a las mujeres —continuó Ransom—, ellas tienen un venero de alegría que a nosotros nos es desconocido: la conciencia de que su presencia en este mundo alivia la mitad de nuestros dolores.

Verena consideró que aquello era muy grato, pero no estaba segura de si se trataba solo de un sofisma; le habría gustado conocer la opinión de Olive sobre la frase. Como por el momento no era posible cambió de tema (desde el momento en que se enteró de que el señor Ransom había pasado por encima de Olive para ir a visitarla, se sentía un

poco turbada), y le preguntó al joven, volublemente, si por casualidad conocía a alguien más en Cambridge.

—A nadie en absoluto; como le he dicho, nunca antes había estado aquí. Solo su presencia me ha logrado atraer. Esta encantadora entrevista será de hoy en adelante mi único lazo con este sitio.

—Es una lástima que no tenga usted otras —dijo Verena pensativamente.

—¿Otras entrevistas? Me sentiría indeciblemente dichoso si eso fuera posible.

—Otras relaciones. ¿Vio usted los colegios al pasar?

—Me pareció ver un gran prado rodeado por altos edificios. Tal vez podré verlos mejor a mi regreso a Boston.

—Sí, sí, debe hacerlo; últimamente han mejorado mucho. La vida universitaria, por supuesto, es lo más interesante, pero hay algunas muestras de arquitectura excelente, especialmente para quien no haya estado en Europa. —Hizo una breve pausa, lo miró con un ojo que parecía brillar, y continuó a toda prisa, como una persona que se concentra antes de dar un salto—. Si quiere usted dar un paseo, yo lo acompañaré con sumo placer y le serviré de guía.

—¿Dar un paseo… y usted me servirá de guía? —repitió Ransom—. Mi querida señorita Tarrant, será para mí el mayor privilegio, la más grande alegría de mi vida. ¡Es una idea espléndida! ¡Usted será la guía ideal!

Verena se levantó para ir a ponerse un sombrero; debía esperarla un poco. Aquella oferta había sido tan franca y cordial que le produjo una sensación desconocida, y él no podía saber que tan pronto como la joven la había hecho (aunque había dudado mucho, en un momento de intensa reflexión) se acusó de haber sido terriblemente incauta. Un impulso la había empujado, y ella lo obedeció con los ojos abiertos. Se sintió como se siente una muchacha cuando ha cometido su primera indiscreción; la joven no consideraba que hubiera cometido antes ninguna, las había cometido de perfecta buena fe y sin ninguna palpitación especial. Esta proposición aparentemente ingenua de dar un paseo por las facultades con el señor Ransom adquiría otro tinte, profundizaba la ambigüedad de su posición sobre un punto del que hablaré inmediatamente. Si Olive no debía saber que lo había visto, esta amplificación de la entrevista redoblaría su secreto. Y, sin embargo, mientras veía crecer aquel monstruoso pequeño misterio, no

lograba que la mortificara la idea de salir con el primo de Olive. Como ya he dicho, se había puesto nerviosa. Fue a ponerse su sombrero, pero en la puerta de la sala se detuvo, se dio la vuelta y se enfrentó a su admirador con un súbito rubor en las mejillas:

—He sugerido esto, porque me parece que tenía el deber de hacer algo por usted… en cambio —dijo—, permanecer sentada aquí delante de usted es como no ofrecerle nada. Y no tenemos nada más. Esta es nuestra única muestra de hospitalidad. Además, el día parece espléndido.

La modestia, la dulzura de esta pequeña explicación, con una especie de deseo tácito, que era casi una súplica, de obrar correctamente, dejó como una fragancia en el aire cuando ella desapareció. Ransom caminó de un extremo al otro de la sala, con las manos en los bolsillos, bajo la influencia de aquella sensación, sin siquiera volver a tomar el libro de la señora Foat. Ocupó ese tiempo en preguntarse por qué perversidad del destino o hado o inclinación personal una criatura tan encantadora tenía que estar perorando sobre una tribuna y viviendo en el bolsillo de Olive Chancellor, y cómo una oradora y una radical podía ser tan fascinante. ¡Y era, además, tan perturbadoramente bella! Este último hecho no fue menos evidente cuando ella bajó ataviada para el paseo. Salieron de la casa y mientras caminaban Ransom recordó que ya se había preguntado antes esa mañana cómo era posible aprovechar esa mezcla de elementos: indolencia y dulzura etérea; un sentimiento de dulzura que parecía impregnar su propio aliento. Ahora podía contestar a esa pregunta: hacer precisamente lo que estaba haciendo era darle a la ocasión un tono en verdad festivo.

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Pasaron dos o tres pequeñas calles que, con sus pequeñas casas de madera y sus empalizadas y portones de madera, parecían haber sido construidas por el carpintero del barrio y su aprendiz —una región sin perspectivas, sin ruidos, con espacios en blanco, enteramente embrionaria—, y entraron a una amplia avenida que, bordeada a ambos lados de villas nuevas que se ofrecían confiadamente a la vista del público, se distinguía por una amplia acera de relucientes ladrillos rojos. La pintura nueva en las paredes de aquellas casas, suficientemente separadas entre sí, brillaba en el aire transparente: tenían, en la cima, pequeñas cúpulas y terrazas; al frente un pórtico con columnas, desnudo ahora que la vida invernal transcurría en los interiores; a cada lado una ventana o dos, y por todas partes una ornamentación de cúpulas, ménsulas, cornisas, florilegios de madera. Casi todas ellas se elevaban sobre pequeñas prominencias del terreno, bien visibles ante el mundo, con la perfecta buena conciencia que en muchos casos procedía, como Ransom había podido ver (y había observado el mismo ornamento cuando había recorrido con Olive el barrio en que vivía la señorita Birdseye), de un número plateado, fijo sobre el cristal superior de la puerta, con las cifras lo suficientemente grandes como para poder ser leídas por la gente que, en los tranvías de caballos, viajaba en medio de la avenida. Esas insignias cintilantes eran las que proporcionaban a la mayor parte de las casas situadas a ambos lados de la avenida su identidad principal. Uno de aquellos tranvías de caballos avanzaba ahora por la avenida; era casi el único objeto que animaba la perspectiva que, en su amplia nitidez, en la tácita implicación de rigurosos hábitos de trabajo de parte de las personas que no estaban a la vista, le resultó muy impresionante a Ransom. Mientras caminaba con

Verena le preguntó sobre la Convención Feminista que había tenido lugar el año anterior; si esta había cumplido sus objetivos y si Verena la había disfrutado.

—¿Qué le importan a usted los objetivos que cumplió? —dijo la joven—. A usted estas cosas no le preocupan.

—Confunde usted mi actitud. A mí esas cosas no me gustan, pero les tengo mucho temor.

En respuesta Verena soltó una carcajada.

—¡No creo que sienta ningún temor!

—Los hombres más valientes han tenido siempre miedo de las mujeres. ¿Ni siquiera me puede decir si disfrutó usted en la convención? Me han dicho que produjo una sensación enorme… que de ahí saltó a la fama.

Verena jamás rechazaba ningún elogio a su capacidad y a su elocuencia; los tomaba en serio, sin la sombra de una preocupación o de una protesta, y se comportaba al respecto como si aquellos elogios fuesen dirigidos a la diosa Minerva.

—Me parece que llamé bastante la atención; por supuesto eso es lo que Olive desea… pues nos pavimenta el camino para el futuro trabajo. No me cabe duda de que convencí a muchas personas que de otra manera no se hubieran convencido. Consideran que esa es mi gran misión, encargarme de los profanos, de aquellos que tienen prejuicios o que no quieren reflexionar, o que no se preocupan de nada que no resulte divertido. Yo despierto su atención.

—Esa es la clase a la que pertenezco —dijo Ransom—. ¿No soy acaso un profano? Me pregunto si habría logrado convencerme o despertar mi atención.

Verena permaneció un rato en silencio mientras caminaban; Ransom oía las ligeras pisadas de sus botas sobre los ladrillos lisos. Luego ella respondió, con la mirada fija hacia delante:

—Creo que ya he logrado despertarla un poco.

—¡Eso desde luego! ¡Ha logrado que desee de la manera más total contradecirla!

—Bueno, esa es una buena señal.

—Me imagino que debió de haber sido muy excitante esa convención —continuó Ransom un momento después—, el tipo de cosa que usted añoraría mucho si volviese al antiguo rebaño.

—¡El antiguo rebaño, muy bien dicho, donde las mujeres eran maltratadas como ovejas! ¡Oh, en junio, al menos durante una semana, hemos temblado! Llegaron delegadas de todos los estados y ciudades; vivíamos en medio de una multitud de personas y de ideas, el calor era intenso, el tiempo magnífico, y los grandes pensamientos y las frases brillantes chisporroteaban por todas partes como chispas incandescentes. Olive hospedó en su casa a seis mujeres célebres muy dotadas intelectualmente, dos en cada habitación; y en las noches de verano nos sentábamos al lado de las ventanas abiertas, frente a la bahía, con las luces reflejadas en el agua, y hablábamos sobre las actividades de la mañana, los discursos, los incidentes, las nuevas contribuciones a la causa. Sostuvimos algunas conversaciones tremendamente serias, cuya audición le hubiera beneficiado a usted, o a cualquier hombre que considere que no somos capaces de alcanzar los puestos más elevados. Luego tomábamos algún refrigerio, ¡consumíamos grandes cantidades de helado! —dijo Verena, en quien la nota de alegría se entreveraba con la de seriedad, casi de exaltación, en una manera que a Basil Ransom le parecía absoluta y fascinadoramente original—. ¡Aquellas sí que fueron grandes noches! —dijo entre una risa y un suspiro.

Su descripción de la convención presentó ante los ojos de Ransom un cuadro muy animado: le pareció ver la sala atestada, excesivamente caldeada, que estaba seguro de que se hallaba repleta de aventureras políticas; escuchar a mujeres de rostros encendidos, con las cintas de los sombreritos sueltas, forzando la voz hasta llegar al grito. Se puso furioso, y lo que más ira le producía era no tener ninguna razón, al pensar que aquella criatura encantadora que estaba a su lado se viera mezclada con semejantes elementos, se codeara con ellos, tratara de emularlos en antiestéticas manifestaciones de fuerza, aplausos y gritos, en la repetición infinita de estupideces. Lo peor de todo era que semejante congregación a ella le resultara aceptable, que Verena hubiera sido aclamada y aplaudida por ásperas gargantas, que hubiera sido consagrada por aquella multitud vulgar como la reina de la ocasión. Más tarde se dijo que su ira carecía absolutamente de justificación, ya que a él no le incumbía lo que la señorita Tarrant decidiera hacer con sus energías, y, además, no se podía esperar nada distinto de ella. Pero en ese momento no se hizo esas reflexiones, en cambio solo vislumbró el hecho de que su compañera hubiese sido odiosamente pervertida.

—Muy bien, señorita Tarrant —dijo con una seriedad mayor que la que sus palabras manifestaban—, me veo obligado a concluir, con pena, que ha sido usted corrompida.

—¿Corrompida? ¡Corrompido estará usted!

—Oh, ya me imagino el tipo de mujeres que hospedaba la señorita Chancellor en su casa, y el grupo que debían de haber formado todas ustedes cuando contemplaban la Back Bay. Solo el pensarlo me deprime.

—Era un grupo encantador e interesante, y si hubiésemos tenido un minuto libre nos hubiéramos hecho fotografiar —dijo Verena.

Esto lo llevó a preguntarle si alguna vez se había sometido a ese proceso; y ella le respondió que un fotógrafo la había buscado tan pronto como regresó de Europa y que había posado para él; algunas tiendas de Boston vendían su retrato. Le dio esa información de un modo muy simple, sin fingir ninguna vaguedad sobre el particular; es más, habló del asunto de un modo bastante respetuoso, como si tuviera cierta importancia. Cuando él dijo que al regresar a la ciudad compraría una de las fotos pequeñas, ella se conformó con recomendarle:

—Bueno, asegúrese de elegir una buena.

Él tenía la esperanza de que la muchacha le ofreciera una con su nombre escrito en la parte inferior, que era la forma de adquisición que él hubiera preferido; pero eso, evidentemente, no se le ocurrió a Verena, pues mientras proseguían su paseo su mente se dirigía en otras direcciones. Esto se demostró por el comentario que hizo ella al final de un silencio, inconsecuentemente.

—Bueno, demostré que podía resultar útil. —Y como él la miraba sorprendido, tratando de adivinar qué quería decir, ella explicó que se refería al brillante éxito obtenido en la convención—. Demostré que puedo resultar útil —repitió—, y eso es lo único que me interesa.

—La utilidad de una mujer verdaderamente amable es hacer feliz a un hombre honrado —dijo Ransom con un tono sentencioso del que era enteramente consciente.

La severidad fue tan pronunciada que hizo que la joven se detuviera en medio de la amplia vereda, mientras lo contemplaba con ojos brillantes.

—Mire, señor Ransom, lo que me asombra es que el interés que se toma usted por mí no sea realmente polémico, sino bastante personal.

Era una muchacha extraordinaria; podía proferir semejantes palabras sin que ninguna segunda intención se reflejara en su cara, sin la menor intención posible de coquetería, ni ningún propósito visible de desafiar al joven a continuar la discusión.

—Mi interés por usted… mi interés por usted… —comenzó. Luego dudó y de pronto exclamó—: Es cierto que su descubrimiento no lo logrará disminuir.

—Bueno, eso es mejor —continuó ella—, así que no necesitamos reñir.

Ransom rió ante la manera en que ella había zanjado las diferencias, y en aquel momento llegaron al irregular grupo de construcciones heterogéneas, capillas, dormitorios, salones, bibliotecas, que se erguían entre los espigados árboles, sobre un terreno reservado, que una valla baja y rústica circundaba más que encerraba (ya que Harvard no conoce ni los celos ni la soberbia de los altos muros y los portones cerrados), y que constituían la gran universidad de Massachusetts. El patio, o precinto escolar, estaba atravesado por diversos pequeños senderos en los cuales, a determinadas horas del día, un millar de estudiantes, con los libros bajo el brazo y la juventud en los pasos, transitaban de un colegio a otro. Verena Tarrant conocía el camino, como se lo había anunciado a su compañero; no era la primera vez que había llevado a un admirador a ver los monumentos locales. Basil Ransom caminaba a su lado y los admiraba, y pensaba que algunos de ellos eran extraordinariamente nobles y venerables. Las estructuras rectangulares de ladrillo rojo le resultaban especialmente atractivas; el sol de la tarde comenzaba a amarillear sobre las fachadas. En las ventanas se podían ver macetas floridas y cortinas de colores brillantes; tenían un aire de tranquilidad escolástica, y de ellas emanaba, pensó el joven de Mississippi, un sentimiento de tradición y de antigüedad.

—Este es el lugar donde me hubiera gustado estudiar —le dijo a su encantadora guía —. Me hubiera sentido muy bien de haber podido estudiar aquí.

—Sí, me imagino que se siente usted atraído por cualquier lugar donde se respiren los antiguos prejuicios —respondió ella, no sin malicia—. Me doy cuenta por su actitud ante nuestra causa de que comparte usted las supersticiones de los viejos letrados. Usted debería haber frecuentado alguna de esas universidades realmente medievales que vimos al otro lado del Atlántico, Oxford, Gottinga o Padua. Se hubiera usted sentido en perfecta armonía con su espíritu.

—Bueno, no sé demasiado sobre esos antiguos centros del saber —respondió Ransom—. Me imagino que este es suficiente para mí. Además tendría la ventaja de no estar demasiado lejos de su casa, sabe usted.

—Creo que no nos hubiéramos visto demasiado en mi casa. Como vive en Nueva York ha venido a visitarme, pero si viviera aquí ya no lo haría; eso pasa siempre.

Con esta filosofía ligera Verena llenó el tiempo necesario para llegar a la biblioteca, en la que introdujo a su compañero con el aire de quien visita con frecuencia aquel lugar sagrado. Aquel edificio, copia reducida de la capilla del King's College del Cambridge inglés, es una institución rica e imponente; y mientras él permanecía allí, en la quietud brillante y tibia que parecía impregnada del olor de antiguas impresiones y viejas encuadernaciones, y contemplaba las altas y luminosas bóvedas colocadas sobre las galerías silenciosas colmadas de libros, estanterías y mesas, y las vitrinas donde los tesoros más valiosos resplandecían vagamente sobre bustos y retratos de los patrocinadores de la institución, las cabezas agachadas de los laboriosos estudiantes y el paso ligero de los empleados, es decir cuando tomó posesión de todo aquello con la mirada, se le reveló la riqueza y la sabiduría del lugar, y entonces sintió más que nunca la amargura de una oportunidad perdida; pero se abstuvo de expresarla (era un sentimiento demasiado profundo para que pudiera manifestarlo), y poco después Verena lo había ya presentado a una joven, una amiga suya que, como explicó, trabajaba en el archivo, y por quien preguntó tan pronto como llegó a la biblioteca, en un escritorio ocupado por otra joven. La señorita Catching, la primera de las dos jóvenes mencionadas, se presentó inmediatamente y saludó a Verena en voz baja pero afectuosamente, y después se dedicó a explicarle a Ransom los misterios del archivo, que consistía en millares de pequeñas tarjetas, colocadas alfabéticamente en un mueble con infinitas gavetas. Ransom estaba enormemente interesado y, mientras seguía junto con Verena a la señorita Catching (ella fue tan amable que les mostró todas las ramificaciones de aquella institución), consideraba con atención los bellos rizos de la joven y su expresión refinada y ansiosa, diciéndose que representaba sin duda alguna las mejores cualidades del tipo de Nueva Inglaterra. Verena encontró la oportunidad para decirle que también ella trabajaba por la causa, y hubo un momento en que casi temió que su acompañante fuera a presentarlo como uno de sus detractores; pero había

algo en los modales de la señorita Catching (y en la influencia de los espaciosos salones) que inhibía la conversación, y que además parecía expresar que si hubiera tenido que escuchar tal revelación, no habría sabido en qué letra catalogarla.

—Hay aquí un lugar donde tal vez sería poco delicado llevar a un nativo de Mississippi —dijo Verena después de este episodio—. Me refiero a aquel alto edificio que sobresale entre todos los demás; aquel gran edificio con sus bellos pináculos que puede verse desde cualquier sitio.

Pero ya Basil Ransom había oído hablar del gran Memorial Hall; sabía qué recuerdos albergaba y qué era lo peor que le podía deparar aquel sitio; la elegante y sobria estructura, el más bello ejemplo de arquitectura que hubiera visto en su vida, le había llamado la atención durante la última media hora. Pensaba que tal vez había demasiado ladrillo en la construcción, pero estaba ornamentada con contrafuertes, torres, claustros, pórticos, como nunca antes había visto en ningún edificio. Aunque no era una construcción antigua resultaba imponente; cubría una gran área y se erguía majestuosamente en el aire invernal. Se destacaba del resto de los edificios del colegio, y se erguía en el centro de un triángulo de prados. Cuando se acercaron, Verena se detuvo de pronto y le dijo:

—Piénselo bien, si no le agrada lo que hay en el interior no es mi culpa.

Él la miró un instante sonriendo.

—¿Hay algo contra Mississippi?

—Bueno, no, no creo que se lo mencione. Pero hay grandes elogios a las hazañas de nuestros jóvenes durante la guerra.

—Me imagino que se dirá que fueron valientes.

—Sí, eso está escrito en latín.

—Bueno, pues lo fueron, yo lo sé muy bien —dijo Basil Ransom—. Debo tener el valor suficiente como para enfrentarlos; no será esta la primera vez.

Y subieron las escalinatas y atravesaron las altas puertas. El Memorial Hall de Harvard consiste en tres alas principales: una de ellas es un teatro donde tienen lugar las ceremonias académicas; otra un amplio refectorio, cubierto de un techo de madera, las paredes decoradas con retratos, e iluminado por ventanas con vitrales, como las salas de los colegios de Oxford; y la tercera, la más importante, es un alto recinto,

sombrío y severo, consagrado a los hijos de la universidad que perecieron en la larga guerra civil. Ransom y su compañera deambularon de una parte a otra del edificio y detuvieron sus pasos en varios lugares de interés, pero se detuvieron por más tiempo en presencia de las blancas lápidas, cada una de las cuales, en su orgullosa y triste claridad, tenía inscrito el nombre de un estudiante soldado. El efecto que produce el lugar es singularmente noble y solemne, y es imposible visitarlo sin que el corazón se conmueva. Su misión es rendir un tributo al deber y al honor, al sacrificio y al ejemplo; parece una especie de templo de la juventud, la virilidad, la generosidad. La mayoría de aquellos caídos eran jóvenes en quienes comenzaba a despuntar la vida; esta simple idea se cierne sobre el visitante y lo induce a leer con ternura todos los nombres y todos los lugares, nombres a menudo sin historia, y olvidadas batallas en el Sur. Para Ransom aquello no representaba ni un desafío ni un ultraje. Producía en él un sentimiento de respeto, de belleza. Sabía ser un adversario generoso, y en aquellos momentos se había olvidado por completo de facciones y partidos. La simple emoción de los viejos tiempos de guerra volvió a él, y el monumento que lo rodeaba le parecía la encarnación de aquel recuerdo; recubría con sus arcos tanto a los aliados como a los enemigos, las víctimas de la derrota así como a los hijos del triunfo.

—Es muy hermoso, pero también me parece horrible. —Este comentario de Verena lo hizo volver a la realidad—. Es un verdadero crimen construir un edificio como este para glorificar una inmensa matanza. Si no fuera tan majestuoso me gustaría que fuera destruido.

—Esa es la deliciosa lógica femenina —respondió Ransom—. Si cuando las mujeres tomen el mando pelean como razonan, no me cabe duda de que tendremos que levantarles monumentos como este.

Verena replicó que ellas razonarían tan bien que nunca tendrían necesidad de combatir; ellas introducirían el reino de la paz.

—Pero esto es también muy pacífico —añadió, mirando a su alrededor; y se sentó en un banco de piedra como para disfrutar de la sugestión de la escena.

Ransom la dejó sola por diez minutos; quiso ver una vez más las lápidas con las inscripciones, y leyó nuevamente los nombres de algunos combates, en muchos de los

cuales había tomado parte. Cuando volvió, ella lo recibió abruptamente con una pregunta que no tenía ninguna relación con la solemnidad del lugar.

—Si la señorita Birdseye sabía que usted iba a venir, ¿no se lo irá a decir a Olive? ¿Y no hará Olive entonces consideraciones sobre la forma en que la ha evitado usted?

—No me preocupan sus consideraciones. De cualquier modo, le pedí a la señorita Birdseye que me hiciera el favor de no mencionarle a mi prima que nos habíamos visto —añadió Ransom.

Verena permaneció en silencio durante un momento.

—Su lógica es casi igual a la de una mujer. ¿Por qué no cambia de parecer y va a visitarla ahora? —continuó—. Con toda seguridad estará en su casa a la hora en que llegue usted a Charles Street. Si fue un poco dura, un poco rígida con usted la primera vez (me puedo perfectamente imaginar cómo pudo haber estado), ahora será diferente.

—¿Por qué va a ser hoy diferente?

—Oh, ella será más indulgente, más accesible, más cordial.

—No lo creo —dijo Ransom; y su escepticismo no pareció menos firme por el hecho de que sonriera alegremente.

—Ahora es mucho más feliz. Puede permitirse no irritarse con usted.

—¿No irritarse conmigo? ¡Un buen aliciente para que un caballero visite a una dama!

—Bueno, ahora será más cordial porque tiene la sensación de haber obtenido un éxito mayor.

—¿Quiere decir porque la ha expuesto a usted al público? No me cabe la menor duda de que eso le haya aclarado inmensamente el horizonte, y usted la ha ayudado mucho. Pero yo he obtenido aquí una impresión encantadora, y no tengo ninguna gana de estropearla, aunque sea usted quien me lo proponga.

—De cualquier manera me imagino que se va a enterar de que ha estado usted aquí —añadió Verena.

—No podrá hacerlo, a menos que usted se lo diga.

—Yo le digo todo —dijo la muchacha; y tan pronto como comenzó a hablar se ruborizó.

Él permanecía frente a ella, trazando con el bastón una figura en el pavimento de mosaico, consciente de que en aquel momento su relación era más íntima. Hablaban

sobre sus problemas, que no tenían nada que ver con los heroicos símbolos que los rodeaban; pero sus asuntos se habían vuelto de repente tan serios que no había ninguna inconveniencia en que los trataran en aquel lugar. La implicación de que la visita de Ransom constituyera un secreto entre los dos los hacía reaccionar de una manera diferente. Pedirle a la muchacha que mantuviera el secreto sería, a juicio de Ransom, una libertad excesiva, y no le preocupaba tanto como para eso; pero si ella prefería hacerlo, esa preferencia solo podía hacerle considerar con más argumentos que su expedición había sido coronada por el éxito.

—Entonces, puede usted decírselo —dijo él después de un momento de silencio.

—Si no lo hiciera, sería la primera… —Y Verena se interrumpió en ese momento.

—Eso debe arreglarlo con su conciencia —prosiguió Ransom riendo.

Salieron del salón, bajaron las escaleras y salieron al Delta, como se llama aquella parte de la universidad. La tarde había comenzado a desvanecerse, pero el aire estaba lleno de un brillo rosado, y había un olor puro y frío, un vago hálito de primavera.

—Bueno, si no se lo digo a Olive, entonces debe dejarme aquí —dijo Verena, deteniéndose junto a un sendero y tendiéndole una mano en señal de despedida.

—No comprendo. ¿Qué tiene que ver una cosa con otra? Además, usted dijo que debía decírselo —añadió Ransom.

Al jugar de esa manera, al disfrutar con el visible titubeo de la muchacha, era ligeramente consciente de su brutalidad masculina, de ser empujado por un impulso para probar la bondad de Verena, que le parecía ilimitada. Ella no mostró ninguna señal de turbación cuando contestó:

—Mire, quiero ser libre… libre de hacer lo que mejor me parezca. Y si es necesario que oculte yo algo, no debe haber ninguna cosa más, no, no debe haberla, señor Ransom.

—¿Ninguna cosa más? Pero ¿qué teme usted que pueda haber si la acompaño a su casa?

—Debo ir sola, debo ir a ver a mi madre —dijo por toda respuesta. Y volvió a tenderle la mano, que él no había tomado la vez anterior.

Por supuesto que ahora Ransom se la estrechó y la retuvo entre las suyas durante un momento; no le gustaba esa manera de despedirse y estaba pensando en pretextos que le

permitieran retardar la separación.

—La señorita Birdseye me dijo que usted me convertiría, pero todavía no lo ha logrado —fue lo único que se le ocurrió decir.

—Aún no lo puede decir; espere un poco. Mi influencia es extraña; algunas veces produce resultados después de cierto tiempo. —Verena decía esas palabras seguramente para salir del paso, y la solemnidad con que se refería a sí misma era cómica; de pronto dijo en un tono mucho más serio—: ¿Quiere usted decir que la señorita Birdseye le prometió eso?

—Desde luego. ¡Y habla usted de influencia! Debería ver la influencia que he logrado tener sobre ella.

—¿Y qué ha logrado usted con esa influencia si yo le digo a Olive que ha venido a visitarme?

—Bueno, creo que ella espera que usted no lo haga. Ella cree que usted va a lograr convertirme en privado… de modo que yo pueda liberarme repentinamente del oscuro Mississippi y convertirme en un prosélito de primera clase. Sería una conversión muy eficaz y dramática.

A Basil Ransom lo que más le impresionaba de Verena era su constante sencillez; pero había momentos en que su candor le resultaba sobrenatural.

—Si yo creyera que ese sería el efecto, haría una excepción —comentó ella, hablando como si tal resultado fuera, después de todo, posible.

—Oh, señorita Tarrant, de cualquier modo usted me convertirá lo suficiente.

—¿Lo suficiente? ¿Qué quiere decir eso?

—Lo suficiente para hacerme terriblemente infeliz.

Ella se le quedó mirando por un momento, evidentemente sin entenderlo; pero se aventuró a lanzarle una réplica, y se dio media vuelta y tomó el camino hacia su casa. La réplica era que si eso lo hacía sentirse infeliz se lo merecía… una expresión que no la comprometía a nada. De vuelta en Boston, Ransom advirtió la curiosidad que tenía por saber si ella lo traicionaría, por así decirlo, con la señorita Chancellor. Lo sabría por la señora Luna; eso casi podía reconciliarlo con la idea de volver a ver a esta última. Olive lo mencionaría cuando le escribiera a su hermana, y Adeline repetiría la

queja. Tal vez esta hasta se atreviera a hacerle una escena; eso sería para él parte de la infelicidad que le había anunciado a Verena Tarrant.

XXVI

«La señora de Henry Burrage lo espera en su casa el miércoles por la noche, 26 de marzo, a las nueve y media.» Gracias al hecho de tener una tarjeta con estas palabras escritas, Basil Ransom pudo presentarse la noche indicada en casa de una señora de la que nunca antes había oído hablar. La relación entre efecto y causa no será completa, sin embargo, mientras se omita que la tarjeta tenía escritas en la esquina inferior izquierda las palabras «Hablará Verena Tarrant». Ransom tenía la impresión (debido al aspecto y aun a la fragancia de la tarjeta impresa) de que la señora Burrage era un miembro de la alta sociedad y fue muy grande su sorpresa al verse introducido en aquel ambiente. Se preguntó qué era lo que podía haber inducido a una señora de tal categoría a enviarle aquella invitación; luego se dijo que indudablemente había sido la misma Verena quien se lo había sugerido. Fuera quien fuese la señora Burrage, seguramente le habría preguntado si deseaba que algunos de sus amigos estuvieran presentes y ella habría asentido y lo habría incluido en el grupo selecto. Ella habría podido darle a la señora Burrage su dirección pues él había escrito una breve carta a Monadnoc Place tan pronto como regresó de Boston, en la que nuevamente le agradecía a la señorita Tarrant las horas encantadoras que había pasado en Cambridge. Ella no había respondido a su carta, pero la tarjeta de la señora Burrage era una respuesta excelente. Semejante misiva exigía una respuesta, y como respuesta subió al tranvía que en la noche del 26 de marzo lo depositaría en la esquina siguiente a la residencia de la señora Burrage. Casi nunca asistía a reuniones nocturnas (se podía decir que no conocía a nadie que las organizara, aunque la señora Luna había tratado de introducirlo en sociedad), y tenía la seguridad de que en esta ocasión se trataba de una reunión que no tenía nada en común con los «ejercicios» nocturnos celebrados en casa de la

señorita Birdseye; pero él hubiera tolerado de buena gana cualquier inconveniencia social con tal de poder ver a Verena Tarrant en una tribuna. Se trataba de una tribuna evidentemente privada y no pública, ya que la admisión se obtenía por invitación y no por la compra de un billete. Él llevaba en el bolsillo la suya, dispuesto a presentarla en la puerta. Me llevaría algún tiempo explicarle al lector la contradicción; pero el deseo de Basil Ransom de estar presente en una de las actuaciones regulares de Verena no disminuía por el hecho de detestar sus puntos de vista y considerar todo el asunto como una indudable perversión. Ahora la comprendía muy bien (desde el día de su visita a Cambridge); había visto que era una muchacha honesta y sencilla. Corría por sus venas una sangre extraña, mala, de conferenciante, y tenía una idea falsamente cómica sobre la capacidad de las jóvenes para dirigir movimientos; pero su entusiasmo era de la más pura especie, sus ilusiones tenían una fragancia, y en cuanto a la manía de exhibirse a sí misma, le había sido inoculada por personas que se aprovechaban de ella para alcanzar fines que a Basil Ransom solo le parecían demenciales. Era una víctima ingenua y conmovedora, ignorante de las fuerzas perniciosas que la arrastraban a la ruina. Y con esta idea de ruina se asociaba en la mente del joven, aunque de una manera bastante oscura e incompleta, la de rescate. Estaba convencido de que el encanto de la muchacha era un don natural, y sus falacias, sus cosas absurdas, un mero reflejo de circunstancias infortunadas, que lo llevaba a tener que dominarse para poder observarla en aquella situación en la que menos le gustaba imaginarla. Tal contemplación le bastaba para saber que Verena era una persona a quien podía concederle un crédito en blanco de tierna compasión. Él esperaba sufrir… sufrir deliciosamente.

Desde el momento que cruzó el umbral de la casa de la señora Burrage no le cupo la menor duda de que se encontraba en el mundo elegante. Este estaba sorprendentemente encarnado en la dama corpulenta y fea vestida con un color brillante, resplandeciente de joyas y con el busto muy escotado que permanecía de pie ante la puerta del primer salón y estrechaba la mano de todas las personas que iban pasando. Ransom le hizo una profunda reverencia a la manera de Mississippi, y ella le dijo que estaba encantada de verlo, mientras las personas que formaban la fila detrás de él lo obligaban a proseguir su camino. De pronto se encontró en un gran salón, entre luces y flores, donde había numerosas personas, y muchas otras damas resplandecientes, sonrientes y con grandes

escotes. Era evidente que se trataba del mundo elegante porque no había allí nadie a quien hubiera visto antes. Las paredes del salón estaban cubiertas con cuadros, el mismo cielo raso estaba pintado y enmarcado. Las personas allí reunidas se empujaban ligeramente unas a otras, avanzaban y retrocedían, mirándose recíprocamente con las expresiones más diversas, a veces con una especie de imperceptible sonrisa benévola; otras, por el contrario, con mirada dura, con una especie de crueldad, por lo menos así le pareció advertir a Ransom; a veces con repentinos ademanes y gestos, murmullos inarticulados, seguidos por una rápida reacción, una especie de tristeza. Estaba ahora totalmente convencido de que se encontraba en medio de la mejor sociedad. Se encontró cada vez más empujado por aquel flujo humano, y vio que otro salón se abría al final de aquel al que había entrado primero, y que en él había una especie de pequeño escenario, cubierto con una alfombra roja, y un gran número de sillas alineadas en filas. Se dio cuenta de que la gente lo miraba, igual que a los demás, aunque le pareció que más que a los demás, y se preguntó si sería muy visible que su presencia allí era una especie de excepción. No pensaba, por supuesto, que su cabeza sobresalía sobre las cabezas de los demás, o que su piel morena, sus ojos brillantes y sus cabellos negros y lacios, la expresión leonina que ya he mencionado en las primeras páginas de esta narración, le daban el relieve necesario para constituir un tema de conversación en el gran mundo. Pero había además otros temas, como pudo advertir por fragmentos de conversación de dos damas que llegaron a su oído mientras permanecía de pie, preguntándose dónde podía estar Verena Tarrant.

—¿Te has hecho miembro? —le preguntó una de las señoras a la otra—. ¡No sabía que te hubieras adherido!

—Oh, no, nada de eso; nada en el mundo me induciría a hacerlo.

—Eso no está bien; te aprovechas de la diversión y en cambio no asumes ninguna responsabilidad.

—¡La diversión…! ¡Vaya diversión! —exclamó la segunda dama.

—No necesitas insultarnos, o jamás te invitaré —replicó la primera.

—Bueno, creí que se trataba de algo instructivo; eso fue lo que pensé; algo útil para la mente. Dime, esta mujer que habla hoy, ¿no viene de Boston?

—Sí, creo que la han hecho venir para pronunciar este discurso.

—Debéis de sentiros desesperadas si tenéis necesidad de recurrir a Boston para vuestros entretenimientos.

—Bueno, hay una sociedad similar en Boston, y nunca he oído decir que tengan que recurrir a alguien de Nueva York.

—Por supuesto que no; ellos consideran que lo tienen todo. Pero ¿no os fastidia pensar todo el tiempo con quién podéis contar?

—No, querida, nunca… Yo voy a presentar al profesor Gougenheim. Nos dirá todo lo que haya que saber sobre el Talmud. Tienes que asistir.

—Bueno, asistiré —dijo la segunda dama—, pero nada me convencerá de que me vuelva un miembro regular.

Fuera cual fuese el círculo místico, Ransom estuvo de acuerdo con la segunda dama en que una asistencia regular debía de ser algo terrible y la admiró por su independencia en medio de aquel mundo tan artificial. Gran parte de la asistencia se encontraba ya reunida en la segunda sala, y muchas personas habían comenzado a ocupar sus sillas frente a la tribuna vacía. El joven llegó a la amplia puerta y vio que se trataba de una amplia sala de música, con un decorado blanco y dorado, el suelo pulido y bustos de mármol de algunos compositores en nichos colocados en las paredes. No se atrevió por timidez a tomar asiento. Vio que las damas estaban instalándose primero. Volvió al primer salón a esperar a que el público se hubiera acomodado, sabiendo que aunque quedara detrás de todos, su estatura le permitiría ver, cuando, de pronto, en una esquina, sus ojos descubrieron a Olive Chancellor. Estaba sentada en un sitio al margen de los invitados y lo miraba fijamente; pero tan pronto como se dio cuenta de que él la había descubierto desvió la mirada, sin dar señales de haberlo reconocido. Ransom dudó por un momento, pero inmediatamente después se dirigió hacia ella; por instinto había sabido que la señorita Chancellor no accedería a que su querida amiga fuera a Nueva York sin ella. Era posible que Olive tratara de evitarlo, sobre todo si sabía que él la había evitado la semana anterior en Boston. Pero era su deber considerar como un hecho que ella le dirigiría la palabra, hasta que no se probara lo contrario. Aunque él la había visto solo dos veces, recordaba muy bien cuán intensamente tímida podía ser, y pensó que era posible que uno de esos espasmos se hubiera apoderado en esos momentos de ella.

Cuando se detuvo frente a ella advirtió que su suposición era del todo precisa. Olive estaba intensamente pálida por el malestar que experimentaba. No estrechó la mano que Ransom le tendió, y él supo que nunca más repetiría ya con él aquella ceremonia. Levantó la mirada cuando él le dirigió la palabra, y sus labios temblaron ligeramente; pero su cara mantuvo su intensa severidad y sus ojos despidieron un destello casi febril. Era evidente que se había refugiado en aquel rincón en busca de soledad; Basil pudo reconocer que como él también Olive se sentía una intrusa. El pequeño sofá en el que se había sentado tenía la forma de aquellos que los franceses llaman *causeuse*; había sitio en él solo para otra persona, y Ransom le preguntó, de manera jovial, si podía sentarse a su lado. Olive se volvió hacia él una vez que se hubo sentado, pero no se atrevió a mirarlo; abrió y cerró el abanico en espera de que se le pasara aquella repentina falta de confianza en sí misma. Pero Ransom no esperó; habló de su encuentro con tono jocoso, preguntándole si había ido a Nueva York con el fin de sublevar al pueblo. Olive miró a su alrededor; casi todos los huéspedes de la señora Burrage les daban la espalda y sus figuras estaban semiocultas por una pirámide de flores que se elevaba sobre un pedestal colocado junto a la parte del sofá que ocupaba Olive y que difundía su perfume por toda la sala.

—¿Cree usted que esto es «el pueblo»? —preguntó Olive.

—No tengo la menor idea. No conozco a nadie aquí; ni siquiera sé quién es la señora Burrage. Sencillamente recibí una invitación.

La señorita Chancellor no le proporcionó ninguna información al respecto; solo dijo después de una breve pausa:

—¿Va usted a todos los sitios a los que le invitan?

—Bueno, voy cuando me parece que tendré el placer de encontrarla a usted —respondió el joven galantemente—. En la invitación se precisaba que la señorita Tarrant pronunciaría una conferencia, y tengo entendido que usted va a dondequiera que ella se presenta. La señora Luna me ha dicho que son ustedes inseparables.

—Sí, somos inseparables. Precisamente por eso estoy aquí.

—¿Se trata entonces de arengar al mundo elegante?

Olive permaneció durante un buen rato con la mirada fija en el suelo, luego levantó los ojos y fulminó con una mirada a su interlocutor.

—Parte de nuestra misión consiste en ir a todas partes; realizar nuestras labores allí donde nos parezca más necesario. Hemos aprendido a sofocar todo sentimiento de repulsión y de disgusto.

—Oh, este lugar me parece realmente agradable —respondió Ransom—. La casa es muy bella y veo algunas caras muy bonitas. En Mississippi no estamos acostumbrados a nada tan brillante.

Olive ofrecía a cada frase de su primo un momentáneo silencio, pero su timidez estaba comenzando a abandonarla.

—¿Tiene usted éxito en Nueva York? ¿Le gusta? —le preguntó Olive en cierto momento, pronunciando aquella pregunta en un tono de infinita melancolía, como si fuera su constante sentimiento del deber el que forzara sus labios.

—¡Éxito! De ninguna manera he tenido el éxito que han logrado usted y la señorita Tarrant; pues, según la opinión de un bárbaro como yo, es una señal de gran prosperidad convertirse en las heroínas de una ocasión como la presente.

—¿Tengo acaso el aire de ser una heroína de ocasión? —preguntó Olive Chancellor, sin la menor sombra de humor, pero produciendo un efecto que era casi cómico.

—Lo sería si no se escondiera usted. ¿No va a ir a la otra sala a oír a la conferenciante? Todo está ya preparado.

—Iré cuando me lo indiquen… cuando me inviten a pasar.

Había en su tono cierta majestuosidad, y Ransom pudo advertir que algo no marchaba bien, que se sentía menospreciada. Observar que se mostraba tan exigente hacia los demás como lo había sido con él lo hizo sentir indulgente, y hubo en su actitud una perfecta disposición a olvidar las diferencias anteriores cuando dijo:

—Hay tiempo aún de sobra. No se ha llenado aún ni la mitad de la sala.

Olive no le respondió directamente, sino que le pidió noticias sobre su madre y sus hermanas, allá en el Sur.

—¿Están contentas? —le preguntó con un tono que parecía advertirle que no pretendiera afirmar que así era.

Basil ignoró su advertencia diciendo que por lo menos estaban contentas al no pensar demasiado en sus problemas y al sacar el mejor partido de las circunstancias. Olive

escuchó esas palabras con grave displicencia, pensando, al parecer, que él había querido darle una lección, ya que de pronto exclamó:

—¡Quiere decir que ha trazado usted una línea de conducta para ellas, y que eso es todo lo que sabe al respecto!

Ransom se la quedó mirando sorprendido; supo, en ese momento, que ella siempre lo sorprendería.

—Ah, no sea cruel conmigo —respondió con su más suave tono de caballero del Sur —. ¿Ya se le ha olvidado la manera en que me trató cuando fui invitado a visitarla en Boston?

—Nos mantienen encadenadas, y cuando nos retorcemos en medio de nuestras agonías, todavía son capaces de decir que no sabemos comportarnos.

Estas palabras, que no disiparon precisamente la sorpresa de Ransom, fueron la respuesta de la joven a la recriminación de este. Ella percibió que estaba realmente sorprendido y que en un momento más comenzaría a reírse, como había ocurrido hacía año y medio (se acordaba de aquella ocasión como si hubiera tenido lugar el día anterior), y para evitarlo añadió precipitadamente:

—Cuando escuche a la señorita Tarrant sabrá a qué me refiero.

—¡Oh, la señorita Tarrant! ¡La señorita Tarrant! —Y Basil Ransom se echó a reír.

¡Así que a fin de cuentas ella no había logrado escapar a sus mofas! Lo miró con aspereza; su timidez había desaparecido del todo.

—¿Qué sabe usted de ella? ¿Qué puede objetarle?

Ransom sostuvo su mirada, y durante un momento se observaron mutuamente. ¿Estaría enterada de su encuentro con Verena, y obedecía su reserva únicamente al deseo de inducirlo a confesar que había estado en Boston y no se había presentado en Charles Street? A Ransom le pareció descubrir una sombra de suspicacia en su cara; pero en relación con Verena ella sería siempre suspicaz. Si en aquel momento hubiera obedecido a sus deseos, habría declarado rotundamente que era mucho lo que sabía sobre la señorita Tarrant, que había paseado y conversado largamente con ella, pero supo frenarse, al considerar que si Verena no lo había traicionado sería del todo incorrecto que fuera él quien lo hiciera. El placer que le producía el hecho de que la joven hubiera mantenido como un secreto personal su visita a la casa de Monadnoc

Place se oscureció por un momento con la amargura de no poderle comunicar a su desagradable prima que él había pasado por encima de ella.

—¿No recuerda que también yo estaba presente en casa de la señorita Birdseye la noche que Verena habló? —se apresuró a decir—. ¿Y que la volví a ver en su casa al día siguiente?

—Ha progresado mucho desde entonces —comentó Olive secamente, y Ransom tuvo en ese momento la sensación de que Verena había mantenido sujeta la lengua.

En ese momento un caballero se abrió paso a través de los distintos grupos de invitados de la señora Burrage y se acercó a Olive.

—Si me concede el honor de apoyarse en mi brazo la acompañaré a un buen sitio en la otra habitación. Ha llegado el momento de que la señorita Tarrant se presente ante el público. La he acompañado a visitar la galería; había varias cosas que ella deseaba ver. Ahora se encuentra con mi madre —añadió, como si la severidad del rostro de la señorita Chancellor constituyera una exigencia de explicaciones sobre la ausencia de su amiga—. Dijo que se sentía un poco nerviosa; así que pensé que lo mejor sería hacer antes un pequeño recorrido por la casa.

—Es la primera vez que me entero de que esto haya ocurrido —respondió Olive Chancellor, preparándose para someterse a la escolta del joven.

Este le dijo que le había reservado el mejor asiento; era evidente que deseaba adoptar una actitud conciliadora, y para ello la trataba como a una persona de notable importancia. Antes de retirarse estrechó la mano de Ransom y comentó que le agradaba conocerlo; Ransom advirtió entonces que debía de tratarse del dueño de la casa, aunque difícilmente podía creer que fuera hijo de la dama corpulenta que lo había recibido en la puerta. Era un joven agradable, elegante y apuesto, con maneras vivaces y cordiales; le recomendó a Ransom que se sentara en la otra habitación, sin demora; si nunca antes había oído a la señorita Tarrant no debía perderse uno de los mayores placeres de su vida.

—Oh, pero el señor Ransom solo ha venido a ventilar sus prejuicios —dijo la señorita Chancellor, y le dio la espalda a su primo.

Basil desistió de precipitarse entre la multitud que marchaba hacia la sala de música, y se contentó con permanecer en el umbral de la puerta junto a un grupo de caballeros.

Casi todos los asientos habían sido ya ocupados; todos, menos uno, hacia el cual vio dirigirse a la señorita Chancellor con su acompañante, abriéndose paso entre los grupos de personas de pie, deslizándose a lo largo de las paredes. El asiento estaba situado precisamente frente a la tribuna, en la primera fila: todas las personas volvieron la cabeza para ver a Olive mientras avanzaba, y Ransom oyó que un caballero, a su lado, le decía a otro:

—Me imagino que ella será también de la misma especie.

Buscó con la mirada a Verena, pero esta evidentemente no había aún aparecido. De pronto sintió un ligero golpecito en la espalda, y al dar media vuelta se encontró cara a cara con la señora Luna, que lo pinchaba con un abanico.

XXVII

—He acabado por acostumbrarme a que no me dirija la palabra en mi propia casa, pero si piensa ignorarme en público creo que debería advertírmelo antes.

Estas palabras de saludo eran muy típicamente suyas, y ya para entonces Basil sabía cómo debía interpretarlas. La señora Luna iba vestida de amarillo y su actitud era positiva y alegre. A Basil le asombró aquel instinto maravilloso por medio del cual ella había descubierto el punto sensible de él. El salón ahora estaba absolutamente vacío, por lo mismo ella tenía el campo libre para sus maniobras. Ransom le ofreció encontrarle un sitio adecuado desde donde pudiera ver y escuchar a la señorita Tarrant; era capaz hasta de llevarle una silla para que pudiera subirse, si deseaba ver el espectáculo por encima de las cabezas de los caballeros que se arremolinaban en la puerta, proposición que ella acogió con una pregunta:

—¿Piensa acaso que he venido acá para escuchar a esa charlatana? ¿No le he dicho ya lo que pienso de ella?

—Bueno, estoy seguro de que no ha venido para verme —dijo Ransom, anticipándose a una insinuación por el estilo—, ya que difícilmente podría saber que yo iba a venir.

—Me lo imaginé… Tuve ese presentimiento —declaró la señora Luna; y se lo quedó mirando con ojos inquisitivos y acusadores—. Sé muy bien por qué ha venido usted —exclamó—. ¡Nunca me había dicho que conocía a la señora Burrage!

—Y así es… Nunca había oído hablar de ella hasta el momento en que recibí su invitación.

—Y entonces, ¿me puede decir por qué lo ha invitado?

Ransom había hablado incautamente, al instante se dio cuenta de que habría sido mejor no haber dicho aquello. Pero con la misma rapidez reparó su error.

—Me imagino que su hermana tuvo la gentileza de invitarme.

—¿Mi hermana? ¡Mi abuela, más bien! Sé lo mucho que Olive lo ama. No trate de hacerse el enigmático, señor Ransom. —Lo había conducido hasta el centro de la sala, lejos de los oídos del grupo que se encontraba en el umbral del otro salón, y tuvo la sensación de que si ella hubiera podido realizar sus deseos habría organizado un pequeño acto social en la sala exterior en oposición al discurso de la señorita Tarrant —. Por favor, venga y siéntese aquí un momento; nadie nos molestará. Tengo algo muy confidencial que decirle.

La señora Luna se dirigió hacia el pequeño sofá en el rincón donde Ransom había hablado con Olive pocos minutos antes, y él la acompañó con extrema desgana, lamentando el tiempo que perdería a su lado. Había casi olvidado que una vez había acariciado la visión de pasar la vida en su compañía, y miró su reloj mientras le decía:

—No tengo la menor intención de perderme la diversión que habrá en la otra sala, usted lo sabe.

Un instante después advirtió que tampoco habría debido decir eso; pero estaba irritado, desconcertado, y no lo pudo remediar. La condición de hombre galante de Mississippi lo obligaba a realizar todo lo que una dama le exigiera y, aunque pueda parecer extraordinario, nunca se había encontrado en una situación en que aquellas exigencias fueran incompatibles con sus propios deseos como en ese momento. Se trataba de una prueba nueva, ya que era evidente que la señora Luna trataría de retenerlo todo el tiempo posible. Ella miró a su alrededor cada vez más satisfecha por el hecho de que tuvieran toda la sala para ellos, y por el momento no abundó en la extrañeza que le causaba encontrarlo allí. Por el contrario observó con alegría que ahora que le habían echado mano seguramente no lo dejarían escapar, que le obligarían a entretenerlos, le inducirían a darles una conferencia sobre las «Luces y sombras de la vida en el Sur», o sobre las «Peculiaridades sociales de Mississippi» en el Club de los Miércoles.

—¿Y qué cosa es realmente el Club de los Miércoles? Me imagino que es de lo que hablaban esas señoras —dijo Ransom.

—No sé de qué señoras me habla, pero esto es el Club de los Miércoles. No me refiero a usted ni a mí, sino a todos esos seres desencantados que están en el otro salón. Es Nueva York cuando trata de ser Boston. Es la cultura y los buenos modales de la metrópoli. Puede que no me crea usted, pero así es. Es el grupo de «gente seria», y son realmente serios; se podría oír hasta el ruido de una aguja al caer allí dentro. Parece como si alguien estuviera a punto de levantarse a ofrecer una plegaria. ¡Qué feliz debe de sentirse Olive de que la tomen tan en serio! Forman una asociación para encontrarse cada semana en casa de alguien, para asistir a una representación, o a la lectura de alguna conferencia o a la explicación de un determinado tema. Mientras más aburrida sea la exposición y más incomprensible el tema más a gusto se sienten. Se imaginan que de esta manera la sociedad de Nueva York va a enriquecer su intelecto. Hay una ley suntuaria, ¿no es así como la llaman?, que rige sus cenas, y se limitan a una especie de caldo espartano. Cuando lo preparan sus cocineros franceses no resulta tan mal. La señora Burrage es uno de los miembros principales, creo que es una de las fundadoras del club; y las veces anteriores que le ha tocado el turno (a cada uno le toca una sesión durante el invierno), según me han dicho ha ofrecido muy buenos conciertos. Pero esa forma de entretenimiento se considera como una fácil evasión, algo de bajo nivel. La gente vulgar puede fácilmente imitar sus veladas musicales. Así que esta vez concibió la idea extraordinaria —y era maravilloso oír a la señora Luna pronunciar ese adjetivo — de hacer venir de Boston a esa muchacha. Por supuesto, fue su hijo quien le metió la idea en la cabeza; este ha vivido en Cambridge durante algunos años, cerca de la casa de Verena, y podía visitarla cuando le venía en gana. Como ahora ya no vive allá le ha resultado cómodo traerla a Nueva York. Permanecerá aquí como huésped de su madre, cuando Olive se marche. Las he invitado a quedarse en mi casa, pero Olive se negó majestuosamente; me dijo que deseaban quedarse en un lugar donde pudieran recibir con entera libertad a «amigas simpatizantes». Así que viven en una pensión extraña, algo como una Nueva Jerusalén en la calle Diez. Olive piensa que su deber la obliga a vivir en sitios semejantes. A mí me sorprendió enormemente que permitiera que Verena se exhibiera ante un grupo de gente de mundo como esta; pero me dijo que habían decidido no dejar escapar ninguna ocasión, que podían esparcir la semilla de la verdad tanto en los salones como en los talleres, y que con una sola persona que convirtieran a

sus ideas ya estaría justificada la visita. Eso es lo que han venido a hacer aquí, a esparcir la semilla; pero a usted no lo van a convertir, de eso me encargaré yo. ¿Ya vio a mi encantadora hermana? ¿Ha visto su manera de arreglarse cuando quiere protestar contra la frivolidad? Parece que ella ha juzgado bastante árido el terreno ahora que lo ha visto. De cualquier manera me parece una vulgar evasión de la señora Burrage el hecho de presentar al público a Verena Tarrant; es algo más banal que un concierto. ¿Por qué no hacer venir simplemente a una bailarina del Niblo si lo que deseaba era exhibir a una joven en el escenario? A nadie aquí le interesan un ápice las ideas de la pobre Olive; si han invitado a Verena es solo por su extraño color de cabello, por sus ojos brillantes y porque se viste como la asistente de un prestidigitador. Nunca he podido entender cómo Olive puede aceptar el gusto vulgar de los trajes de Verena. Supongo que solo porque sus propios vestidos son cortados de un modo realmente horroroso. Me mira usted como si no me creyera; pero le aseguro que es un corte revolucionario y eso tranquiliza la conciencia de Olive.

Ransom se sorprendió al oír que miraba a su interlocutora como si no la creyera, ya que se había encontrado, después de su descontento inicial, escuchando con considerable interés todos los pormenores de la visita de la señorita Tarrant a Nueva York. Después de un momento, como resultado de una meditación privada, hizo esta pregunta:

—¿El hijo de la dueña de la casa es un joven muy cortés que lleva un chaleco blanco?

—No sé de qué color es su chaleco; pero hay algo adulador en sus maneras. Verena supone por eso que está enamorado de ella.

—Tal vez lo esté —dijo Ransom—. Me ha dicho usted que ha sido idea de él hacerla venir.

—Oh, le gusta flirtear; eso es casi seguro.

—Tal vez Verena lo ha convertido.

—No a lo que ella quiere, me imagino. Su fortuna es muy grande; él la recibirá uno de estos días.

—¿Quiere usted decir que ella desea imponerle el yugo del matrimonio? —preguntó Ransom, con su languidez de hombre del Sur.

—Creo que ella considera el matrimonio como una superstición caduca; pero aquí y allá se podría dar un caso en que sea la mejor cosa por hacer cuando el nombre del caballero es Burrage y el de la joven es Tarrant. Yo personalmente no siento ninguna admiración por los Burrage. Pero pienso que ella ya habría conquistado a este delfín si no fuera por Olive. Olive se interpone entre ellos; quiere mantenerla en la hermandad de las vírgenes, mantenerla, sobre todo, para sí. Por supuesto no quiere saber nada de matrimonio y le ha puesto un palo en las ruedas. Olive la ha traído a Nueva York y eso podría parecer una contradicción a lo que afirmo; pero la muchacha tiene muchos bríos, y alguna vez Olive debe dejarla hacer su voluntad, arrojar algo por la borda a fin de salvar el resto. En lo que se refiere al señor Burrage es necesario admitir que tiene gustos raros para ser un caballero; pero de esto es imposible discutir. También se puede decir que son gustos raros para una dama de categoría; y la pobre Olive es una dama. Eso se advierte de inmediato. Hoy mismo está vestida como una vendedora de libros y, sin embargo, resulta más distinguida que cualquier otra persona presente. A su lado, Verena parece un hombre-anuncio.

Cuando la señora Luna hizo una pausa, Basil Ransom advirtió que en la otra sala había comenzado ya el discurso de Verena; el sonido de su voz clara, vibrante y luminosa, una voz admirable para dirigirse al público, les llegó desde la distancia. Su ansiedad para levantarse y dirigirse a un sitio donde pudiera oírla mejor y verla actuar, lo hizo moverse en la silla y este movimiento provocó una carcajada burlona de su acompañante. Pero ella no dijo: «Ande, ande, iluso, qué pena me da», sino que solo comentó con ligera impertinencia que seguramente no carecería de la galantería necesaria para dejar a una dama absolutamente sola en un lugar público —la señora Luna se complacía en calificar así el salón de la señora Burrage—, para obligarlo a permanecer a su lado. Ella podía manejar al pobre Ransom como quisiera gracias a las tradiciones del Sur. En su código simple de buenas maneras hubiera resultado una grosería imperdonable abandonar la conversación de una dama antes de que otro caballero hubiera llegado a ocupar su sitio; aquello equivalía casi a ultrajar a la dama. Todos los otros caballeros que estaban en casa de la señora Burrage estaban ya bien acomodados; no había la más mínima posibilidad de que alguno acudiera a rescatarlo.

Era imposible que dejara sola a la señora Luna y, sin embargo, no podía permanecer con ella y perder la única cosa por la cual se había desviado tanto de su camino.

—Permítame, por lo menos, que le encuentre un sitio allí, junto a la puerta. Podrá usted subirse en una silla, y apoyarse sobre mí.

—Se lo agradezco mucho, pero prefiero apoyarme en este sofá. Estoy demasiado cansada para permanecer de pie sobre una silla. Por otra parte, nada me disgustaría tanto como que Verena y Olive me vieran alargar el cuello por encima de la multitud… ¡como si para mí tuvieran alguna importancia sus arengas!

—¡Todavía no ha llegado el momento de arengar! —dijo Ransom con una sequedad salvaje; y se inclinó hacia delante, con un codo sobre las rodillas, los ojos en el suelo, y un flujo de sangre en las mejillas.

—Nunca debería llegar el momento de decir cosas como esas —comentó la señora Luna arreglándose unos lazos.

—¿Cómo puede saber lo que está diciendo?

—Lo puedo decir por la manera en que su voz sube y baja. El sonido es absolutamente idiota.

Ransom permaneció sentado otros cinco minutos, minutos que, pensó, el ángel del Juicio debería anotar a su crédito, y se preguntó cómo podía ser tan torpe la señora Luna como para no advertir que se estaba comportando odiosamente. Pero ella era lo suficientemente torpe como para hacer cualquier cosa. Él trató de mostrar indiferencia, y llegó a preguntarse si el código social de Mississippi, después de todo, era el adecuado. Por supuesto que no preveía casos como aquel.

—Es tan claro como la luz del día que el señor Burrage pretende casarse con ella, si es que puede —dijo Ransom en determinado momento, calculando el efecto que su observación podía causar y a la vez tratando de disimular su estado de ánimo verdadero.

Pero estas palabras no obtuvieron ninguna respuesta de parte de su acompañante, y después de un instante volvió un poco la cabeza y le lanzó una mirada de curiosidad. Algo que silenciosamente pasó entre ellos hizo que la señora Luna exclamara abruptamente:

—Señor Ransom, mi hermana nunca le envió una invitación para esta reunión. ¿No habrá sido Verena Tarrant quien lo hizo?

—No tengo la menor idea.

—Desde el momento en que no conoce usted a la señora Burrage, ¿quién más habría podido enviarla?

—Si la invitación fue enviada por la señorita Tarrant al menos debería agradecer su cortesía escuchándola.

—Si se levanta usted de este sofá le comunicaré a Olive mis sospechas. Ella es absolutamente capaz de llevarse a Verena a China… o a cualquier otro lugar lejos de su alcance.

—¿Y podría yo saber cuáles son sus sospechas?

—Que ustedes dos se han estado comunicando por correspondencia.

—Dígale lo que quiera, señora Luna —dijo el joven con una tétrica resignación.

—Por lo que veo no se atreve usted a negarlo.

—Jamás contradigo a una dama.

—Veremos si no logro hacerle decir una mentira. ¿No ha estado usted viendo también a la señorita Tarrant?

—¿Dónde podría verla? No puedo ver desde aquí a Boston, como usted misma me decía el otro día.

—¿No ha ido usted a visitarla en secreto?

Ransom se sobresaltó de una manera perceptible, pero para ocultarlo se levantó al instante.

—Si se lo dijera a usted dejaría de ser un secreto.

Cuando volvió a dirigirle la mirada desde lo alto, se dio cuenta de que las palabras de ella eran un buen golpe, no el resultado de un conocimiento definitivo. En ese momento le pareció vana, egoísta, rapaz, detestable.

—Está bien; daré la voz de alarma —prosiguió—. Es decir, lo haré si usted me abandona. ¿Es este el modo en que un caballero del Sur puede tratar a una dama? Haga usted lo que deseo y lo dejaré libre.

—No me sentiré libre mientras me obligue a permanecer a su lado.

—¿Es eso realmente una carga? ¡Jamás me habían dicho una grosería de este calibre! —exclamó la señora Luna—. De cualquier modo estoy determinada a mantenerlo a mi lado mientras pueda.

Ransom se daba cuenta de que ella estaba en una posición incorrecta, y sin embargo, superficialmente, le pareció (y aquello era del todo intolerable) que tenía la razón de su parte. Y todo esto mientras la voz de oro de Verena, con sus palabras confusas, acariciaban su oído. Aquel asunto había definitivamente puesto nerviosa a la señora Luna; había llegado a ese punto de confusión femenina en que una mujer se vuelve perversa solo por el gusto de serlo, y hasta con una clara visión de las consecuencias nefastas que derivarán de su actitud.

—Ha perdido usted la cabeza —dijo él con la mirada fija sobre ella.

—Desearía que me trajera una taza de té.

—Dice usted eso solo para molestarme.

Acababa de decir esas palabras cuando una gran ola de aplausos, y el grito de muchas gargantas: «¡Bravo!, ¡bravo!», irrumpió en el aire y se extinguió. El pulso de Ransom se aceleró, y lanzó a paseo sus escrúpulos, y después de haber observado a la señora Luna, aunque con toda la debida ceremonia, de un modo que le hizo temer que iba a tener que resignarse a perder su estimación, le dio la espalda y se alejó a grandes pasos hacia la puerta abierta de la sala de música.

—¡Jamás me había sentido tan insultada! —la oyó exclamar, con excesiva mordacidad, mientras se alejaba de ella; y, cuando la observó, mientras ocupaba su nuevo puesto, la vio aún sentada en el sofá, sola en medio de la sala desierta, con los ojos que lanzaban, a través del espacio, pequeños destellos vengativos. Bueno, ella podía ir a donde él se hallaba si tanto lo deseaba; él la habría podido subir sobre una otomana, lo que le permitiría ver a la oradora. Pero la señora Luna era inflexible; Ransom se dio cuenta después de un minuto de que ella se había retirado altivamente del lugar, y no la vio más en toda la noche.

XXVIII

Podía dominar perfectamente toda la sala de música desde el lugar donde se encontraba, detrás de una multitud de caballeros que escuchaban con intensa atención. Verena Tarrant estaba erguida sobre la pequeña plataforma vestida de blanco, con flores en el pecho. La roja alfombra bajo sus pies asumía un aspecto precioso a la luz de las lámparas colocadas sobre altos pedestales a ambos lados del escenario, lo que confería a su figura una vívida atmósfera de calor que la hacía más nítida y pura. Se movía libremente, como aislada en la misma soledad, pero sus gestos eran mesurados y sobrios; no había ninguna mesa frente a ella, ni tenía notas en la mano, sino que actuaba como una actriz frente a las bambalinas, o como una cantante que emitiera sonidos vocales con una garganta de plata. Había tal riesgo de que el intento de una joven muchacha provinciana, que pretendía fascinar a unas doscientas neoyorquinas *blasés* simplemente ofreciéndoles sus ideas, fracasara por completo, que al final de unos pocos momentos Basil Ransom fue consciente de que la observaba con la misma excitación que si ella estuviera columpiándose sobre la cabeza de él en un trapecio. Sin embargo, al escucharla, era imposible no percibir que estaba en perfecta posesión de sus facultades, de su tema y su público; Ransom se acordaba bastante bien de la ocasión en que la había oído en casa de la señorita Birdseye como para poder medir la distancia que ella había recorrido a partir de entonces. La nueva actuación era mucho más completa, sus modales eran más seguros; parecía hablar y contemplar toda la sala desde una altura muy superior. También su voz se había educado; se le había olvidado cuán bella podía ser cuando la elevaba a su más amplia potencia. Un tono como aquel, tan puro y rico, y sin embargo tan joven, tan natural, constituía ya de por sí una forma de talento; no le extrañaba que hubiera levantado tanto entusiasmo en la Convención

Feminista, si había llenado aquella odiosa sala con semejante música. Había leído hacía algún tiempo sobre las *improvvisatrice* de Italia, y esta era una versión americana, casta y moderna de aquel tipo, una Corinna de Nueva Inglaterra, con una misión en vez de una lira. Lo que más la agraciaba era su seriedad, el modo en que sus ojos deliciosos vagaban sobre aquel público elegante (ante el que no sentía la menor timidez) como si quisiera resumirlo en un solo espectador, pareciendo implicar que la única cosa que le interesaba en la vida era poner la verdad en una forma que impidiera resistirse a la convicción de lo expresado. Era tan sencilla como encantadora, y no había ni una sola mirada ni una sola frase que no pareciera surgir de la pura e inextinguible pasión que la animaba. Había logrado, en efecto, reducir a su auditorio a un solo hombre; la atención general era apasionada; el público sonreía cuando ella sonreía, permanecía inmóvil cuando ella hablaba con solemnidad; y era evidente que el entretenimiento que la señora Burrage había tenido la brillante idea de ofrecer a sus amigos sería recordado en los anales del Club de los Miércoles. Era agradable para Basil Ransom pensar que Verena había advertido su presencia; los ojos de la muchacha se movían sobre el auditorio con tal libertad que era imposible decir que se posaran en un punto más que en otro; sin embargo, un rayo rápido que, no obstante, no pareció desviarla de ninguna manera de su ridícula, fantástica, deliciosa disertación, le hizo sentir al joven que había advertido primero su ausencia y que ahora le hablaba en especial. Y esa mirada lo confirmó también en la idea de que la invitación le había sido enviada a petición de Verena. Ransom dio por hecho que el asunto del que hablaba era ridículo; ¿de qué otra manera podía ser? ¿Y en el fondo qué le importaba? Ella no era por eso menos encantadora, y las alucinaciones de que hablaba no dejaban de ser alucinaciones, a pesar de la encantadora manera en que las expresaba. Después de permanecer de pie un cuarto de hora se dio cuenta de que le hubiera resultado imposible repetir una sola palabra de lo que ella había dicho; no había hecho el menor caso, y sin embargo no había perdido una sola de las vibraciones de su voz. Había descubierto a Olive Chancellor en ese momento; estaba en la primera fila, precisamente en el fondo, del lado izquierdo. A pesar de que le daba la espalda, podía ver la mitad de su afilado perfil, la cabeza inclinada y absolutamente inmóvil. Aun a tanta distancia, tuvo la impresión de que su actitud expresaba una especie de calma extática, una

concentración en el triunfo. Hubo varias efusiones de aplausos inmediatamente sofocados, pero Olive no levantó en ningún momento la mirada, ni siquiera ante los más calurosos, y esa impasibilidad no podía derivar de ninguna otra cosa sino de una firme y resuelta voluntad. El éxito estaba en el aire, y ella lo paladeaba: lo paladeaba, como hacía siempre, de un modo absolutamente personal. El triunfo de Verena era su triunfo, y Ransom estaba seguro de que lo que hubiera coronado aquel triunfo hubiese sido poder verlo a él en aquel momento para poder gozar de su embarazo y de su confusión y poderle decir con palabras heladas: «Pues bien, ¿sigue usted pensando que nuestro movimiento no constituye una fuerza, y que las mujeres hemos nacido solo para ser esclavas?». Pero para decir la verdad no se sentía en lo más mínimo confuso, y no le hacía cambiar ninguna de sus heréticas ideas el percibir que Verena Tarrant tenía aún más poder de atraer su atención de lo que hasta ese momento había supuesto. Estaba absorto de un modo en que nunca antes lo había estado; sin embargo, el discurso penetró profundamente en su espíritu, a pesar de los obstáculos que le anteponía. Algunas frases comenzaron a tener para él un significado preciso: eran un llamado que ella hacía a quienes aún se resistían a la influencia benéfica de la verdad. Eran personas, según se desprendía de sus palabras, cínicas y burlonas; seres inútiles y superficiales, tan desprovistos de corazón y de inteligencia que no importaba lo que opinaran sobre ningún tema; si la antigua tiranía recurría a semejantes individuos quería decir que se encontraba precisamente en la peor de las situaciones. Pero había otros cuyos prejuicios estaban más profundamente arraigados, se obstinaban en cultivarlos y pretendían basarse en estudios y razonamientos filosóficos. Era a ellos a quienes principalmente dirigía su discurso; quería enfrentarse a ellos, diciendo: «¡Mirad, vivís completamente en el error; seréis mucho más felices cuando os haya convencido. Permitidme solo cinco minutos»; les diría, además: «Sentaos aquí solo un momento y dejad que os haga solo una sencilla pregunta: ¿creéis acaso que un sistema social puede proporcionar buenos resultados cuando está basado en el error organizado?». Tal era la sencilla pregunta que Verena deseaba plantear, y Basil le sonrió a través de la sala con una ternura divertida, pues imaginaba que esa pregunta le estaba dirigida a él. Pensó que no le espantaría mucho que ella le preguntara aquello, y que estaba dispuesto a sentarse a su lado todo el tiempo que ella deseara.

Por supuesto él pertenecía a la especie de bromistas encallecidos, uno de aquellos a los que Verena aludía al decir:

—¿Sabéis qué impresión me producís? Me dais la impresión de ser hombres que mueren de hambre mientras en vuestra casa las bodegas están colmadas de pan, de carne y de vino; o de ciegos y dementes que se hacen encarcelar por deudas cuando tenéis en los bolsillos las llaves de cofres repletos de oro y plata. Oro y plata, carne y vino representan —decía Verena— los esfuerzos reprimidos y desperdiciados, el remedio precioso, del cual la sociedad locamente se priva, el genio, la inteligencia, la inspiración de las mujeres. La sociedad va pereciendo, pulgada a pulgada, en medio de una infinidad de viejos prejuicios a los que recurre inútilmente, mientras que tiene en sus mismas manos el elixir de una larga vida. Si solo bebiese un sorbo, volvería nuevamente a florecer, recuperaría nuevamente su lozanía y su esplendor, volvería otra vez a ser joven. El corazón, el corazón está helado y nada sino el tacto de una mujer podrá volver a darle calor y a hacerlo actuar. Nosotras somos el Corazón de la humanidad, y debemos tener el valor de insistir en este punto. La vida pública continúa dando vueltas en el mismo círculo vicioso, el círculo del egoísmo, la crueldad, la ferocidad, los celos, la avaricia, el ciego deseo de hacer cosas solo en beneficio de unos cuantos en detrimento de los otros, en vez de intentar el bien común. El bien de todos. ¿De todos? ¿Quién podría atreverse a decir «todos» cuando no se nos incluye en ese término? Somos una parte igual, espléndida e inestimable de la sociedad. Ponednos a prueba y lo veréis; os preguntaréis cómo, sin nosotras, la sociedad ha alcanzado el nivel que ocupa, tan absolutamente insignificante respecto al que podría haber alcanzado, en su penoso peregrinaje terrestre. Eso es lo que me gustaría poder destilar a través de los oídos de aquellos que aún se muestran reacios, que levantan altivamente la cabeza mientras repiten fórmulas duras y carentes de contenido, tan secas como los rastrojos que crecen en el desierto. Les haría reconocer su egoísmo, su indolencia, sus bajos intereses. Pero no he venido aquí para recriminar a nadie, ni para profundizar el abismo que se ha abierto entre nuestros dos sexos, y no acepto la doctrina de que sean enemigos naturales, precisamente porque lo que me interesa es que exista una unión mucho más íntima (aunque, por supuesto, basada en una igualdad de derechos) que la que han concebido los sabios y los filósofos de otras épocas. No me detendré pues en

el hecho de que los hombres se dejan influenciar más fácilmente por la consideración de lo que es más útil y agradable para ellos; simplemente me limitaré a precisar que ellos han sufrido esa influencia, y les diré que nuestra causa habría triunfado ya hace muchos años si su visión no fuera tan mezquina, tan estrecha, aun en asuntos concernientes a su propio interés. Si tuvieran la vista aguda y rápida de las mujeres, y la inteligencia del corazón, el mundo sería ahora muy diferente; y os aseguro que por lo menos la mitad de la amargura de nuestra grey se debe a la posibilidad de ver los problemas con tanta claridad y a su imposibilidad de actuar. Estimados señores, si pudiera yo induciros a creer cuán luminoso, apacible y agradable podría ser el jardín, la vida, para vosotros con solo que nos permitierais ayudaros a hacerlo florecer. Os gustaría mucho más poder pasear por él, encontraríais prados y árboles y flores que os harían pensar que habíais llegado al Edén. De eso es de lo que quisiera persuadir a todos y cada uno de vosotros; ofreceros la visión del mundo tal y como se presenta siempre ante mis ojos, un mundo redimido, transfigurado por un nuevo tono moral. La generosidad, la ternura, la simpatía existieron allí donde hasta ahora solo hay fuerza bruta y sórdidas rivalidades. Pero ¿es posible que vosotros mismos seáis indiferentes a vuestra propia felicidad? Hay muchos que aseguran que nosotras ejercitamos toda la influencia que es necesario que ejerzamos y hablan como si les debiésemos quedar agradecidas hasta de que se nos permita respirar. Pero yo os pregunto: ¿quién debe juzgar nuestras necesidades sino nosotras mismas? Lo único que exigimos es libertad, exigimos que se abra al fin la jaula en la que hemos permanecido encerradas durante siglos. Diréis que es una caja muy cómoda, agradable y conveniente, con paredes de cristal, para que podamos ver hacia el exterior, y que lo único que se necesita es darle otra vuelta a la llave. Esa es una respuesta fácil. ¡Queridos señores, vosotros jamás habéis permanecido encerrados en la jaula y por consiguiente no sabéis lo que se siente al estar en ella!

El cronista que ha recogido estos documentos no cree que sea necesario detenerse más en las dotes de oradora de Verena, sobre todo porque Basil Ransom, a través de cuyos oídos estamos escuchando, llegó en ese momento a una conclusión definitiva. Él había medido sus dotes de oradora pública, juzgado su importancia en el terreno de la polémica y en pro de ciertas reformas. Su discurso tenía el valor de un ensayo bien

hecho, aprendido de memoria y recitado en una academia por una alumna brillante. Era vago, débil, absurdo, un tejido de lugares comunes que cintilaba agradablemente bajo las lámparas del salón de la señora Burrage. Desde un punto de vista serio ni siquiera valía la pena que se le respondiera o se le considerase, y Basil Ransom se puso a reflexionar sobre la locura de una época en que una actuación de ese tipo era tratada como un esfuerzo cultural y una contribución a la solución de un problema social. Se preguntó qué hubiera pensado él o cualquiera de los demás si en vez de la joven declamadora aquellas ideas hubieran sido expuestas en la tribuna por la señorita Chancellor, o por la señora Luna. De cualquier manera su importancia era grande, y consistía precisamente, en parte, en el hecho de que la voz no era la de Olive o la de Adeline. Su importancia consistía en que Verena era indescriptiblemente atractiva, y eso era lo que más le importaba a él, pues de pronto advirtió que mientras permanecía allí de pie se estaba enamorando de ella. Este descubrimiento se anunció con una ligera palpitación en el corazón, y antes de que pudiera dudar u objetar, la puerta se había abierto ante él y la mansión se colmó de luces. Ningún signo exterior reveló su pasión. Permaneció con la mirada fija, como si estuviera contemplando un cuadro; pero la sala pareció bailar ante sus ojos, y así también la imagen de Verena pareció bailar un poco. Esto no le facilitó la comprensión del resto del discurso: el significado de sus frases se desvanecía de nuevo en una agradable vaguedad, y él sencillamente sintió su presencia, paladeó su voz. Sin embargo su capacidad de reflexión no se suspendió; se regocijó de que los argumentos de la joven fueran tan débiles, tan inevitablemente retóricos. La idea de que ella fuera brillante, que constituyera una revelación para el público, solo porque la mente de este era incapaz de pensar con coherencia, no constituía una humillación sino un deleite para Basil; era una prueba más de que el apostolado de la joven era una pura tontería, una mofa efímera, el mayor de los fracasos, y que Verena había sido creada para algo divinamente diferente… para una vida privada, para él, para el amor. No supo cuánto tiempo permaneció ella hablando; solo supo, una vez que terminó el discurso y que fue acogido por una ola de aplausos, un gran rumor de voces y de sillas que se movían, que había sido definidamente malo, pero que el triunfo personal de Verena, envolviéndolo todo con un encanto como la niebla de plata que rodea una fuente, era tal que impedía que su enamorado se sintiera mortificado. Los

invitados, por lo menos aquellos que no se dirigieron inmediatamente a felicitar a Verena, se diseminaron por el otro salón, y lo condujeron, envuelto en la corriente, hasta una mesa dispuesta para la cena, donde contempló las señales de aquella ley suntuaria mencionada por la señora Luna. Parecía encarnarse sobre todo en el resplandor del cristal y la plata, y por los vivos tonos de algunos platillos misteriosos y de las gelatinas, que parecían verdaderamente apetitosas bajo el tenue reflejo de luz proyectado por las lámparas. Oyó el descorchar de botellas, sintió una presión de codos y un espesor de la multitud; se dio cuenta de que era empujado hacia la mesa por algunos señores que le hicieron sentir que estaba ocupando un espacio indebido, ya que ni se servía ni permitía que se sirvieran los demás. Había perdido de vista a Verena; la joven se había desvanecido entre nubes de felicitaciones; y se sorprendió al pensar, casi paternalmente, que la muchacha debía de estar hambrienta después de hablar tanto, y deseó que alguien se acordara de llevarle un plato. Después de un momento, mientras se alejaba de allí, pues la oportunidad de una cena mejor que las cotidianas no ocupaba un lugar preeminente en sus pensamientos, aquella visión se vio de pronto encarnada precisamente en la figura de la propia señorita Tarrant, que se acercaba apoyada en el brazo de un joven que reconoció ahora como el hijo de la anfitriona: el joven sonriente y fragante que había interrumpido hacía una hora su conversación con Olive. Mientras se acercaban a la mesa los demás invitados les abrían paso, cubriéndola de elogios y de miradas de admiración. Ransom pudo ver que, de acuerdo con una frase que recordó, extrañamente, en ese momento, extraída de alguna novela o poema que había leído hacía mucho tiempo, Verena era la estrella polar que atraía todas las miradas. Estaba muy hermosa, y los dos formaban una bella pareja. Tan pronto como lo vio le tendió la mano izquierda —la otra estaba sobre el brazo del señor Burrage—, y le dijo:

—Bien, ¿no cree usted que todo lo que he dicho es cierto?

—¡No!, ni una sola palabra —respondió Ransom en un tono de alegre sinceridad—. Pero eso no establece la menor diferencia.

—Para mí, en cambio, establece todas las diferencias —exclamó Verena.

—Quiero decir para mí, personalmente. No me interesa en lo más mínimo estar de acuerdo con usted —dijo Ransom mirando al señor Burrage, que se había alejado en busca de algo de comer para Verena.

—Bueno, si es usted tan indiferente…

—No es que yo sea indiferente.

Sus ojos se encontraron nuevamente con los de la muchacha, cuya expresión había cambiado antes de apartarlos. Ella comenzó a quejarse a su amigo, que le traía algo muy vistoso en un plato, de que el señor Ransom se le «resistía», que era el peor elemento que había conocido. Henry Burrage le sonrió a Ransom de una manera que parecía expresarle que se acordaba muy bien de haber hablado ya con él, mientras el joven de Mississippi se confesaba a sí mismo que no sería nada extraño que entre aquellos jóvenes hermosos y mimados por la fortuna surgiera una relación de amor o un enlace matrimonial, como había insinuado la señora Luna. Que el señor Burrage tenía éxito se podía ver al instante; no tanto quizá por poseer una inteligencia poderosa o una personalidad muy acentuada, sino por ser rico, cortés, apuesto, feliz y simpático, y por llevar una espléndida camelia en el ojal. Y que también él pensaba que Verena había triunfado lo probó su tono causal y cortés, y la mirada de complacida diversión cuando exclamó:

—¡No me va a decir que no le conmovió la conferencia! Según mi opinión la señorita Tarrant podrá lograr todo lo que se proponga. —Parecía tan satisfecho consigo mismo y tan seguro de sus convicciones que no le importaba lo que cualquier otro pensara; lo que, después de todo, constituía una actitud idéntica a la de Basil Ransom.

—Oh, no he dicho que no me haya sentido conmovido —dijo el joven de Mississippi.

—Conmovido por razones impropias —dijo Verena—. No me importa; usted se va a quedar atrás.

—Si es así, ¿retrocederá usted para consolarme?

—¿Retroceder? ¡Jamás retrocederé! —respondió la muchacha alegremente.

—Será usted la primera —continuó Ransom, sin desear ya en ese momento, como si fuera por un repentino esclarecimiento de su atmósfera espiritual, hacer concesiones dictadas por la galantería, y consciente a la vez de que sus palabras eran una expresión de homenaje.

—Yo llamaría a eso presunción —exclamó el señor Burrage, dándose la vuelta para ir a recoger un vaso de agua para Verena, quien se había negado a aceptar el champán,

declarando que jamás había probado una gota de licor en su vida y que ella lo asociaba con algo indebido.

En casa de Olive no había vinos (aunque no fue Verena quien dio esa explicación) sino el viejo madeira y un poco de clarete de su padre, el primero de los cuales Basil había apreciado ampliamente el día en que fue invitado a comer en ella.

—¿Es posible que crea él en todas estas fantasías? —preguntó, sabiendo perfectamente en qué sentido debía tomar la acusación de presunción lanzada por el señor Burrage.

—Es un entusiasta de nuestro movimiento —respondió Verena—. Es uno de mis convertidos que más satisfacciones me ha producido.

—¿Y no lo desprecia usted por eso?

—¿Despreciarlo? Por lo que veo usted piensa que yo cambio de opinión con mucha frecuencia.

—Bueno, a mí se me ocurre que yo la veré a usted cambiar de ideas todavía —comentó Ransom, en un tono que le hubiera permitido a Henry Burrage pensar, de haber oído esas palabras, que la presunción llegaba a la fatuidad.

En Verena, sin embargo, el efecto que hubieran podido producir no le impidió decir con toda naturalidad y sin el menor rencor:

—Bueno, si espera usted que retroceda yo cinco mil años, espero que no se lo diga a la señorita Birdseye. —Y como Ransom no captó inmediatamente la alusión, añadió—: Usted sabe que ella está convencida de que va a ocurrir exactamente lo contrario. Fui a verla casi inmediatamente después de que estuvo usted en Cambridge.

—¡La viejecita querida! —dijo el joven—. Espero que esté bien.

—Está tremendamente interesada.

—Ella siempre está interesada en algo, ¿no es así?

—Esta vez lo está en nuestras relaciones —dijo Verena, y solo ella hubiera podido decir algo semejante con aquel tono—. Debería usted ver con qué pasión las ha tomado. Está convencida de que todo resultará en beneficio de usted.

—¿A qué «todo» se refiere, señorita Tarrant? —preguntó Ransom.

—Hemos hablado varias veces sobre esto. La señorita Birdseye está segura de que usted se va a convertir en uno de nuestros dirigentes, de que usted tiene la preparación

necesaria para tratar cuestiones importantes e influir en las masas, que un día se convertirá en un entusiasta de nuestra causa y que todo eso lo lograré yo.

Ransom la escuchaba sonriendo; el oscuro reflejo en sus ojos expresó una ternura que no le permitía exaltarse con la previsión de tales triunfos futuros, pero que, sin embargo, testimoniaba haber sufrido la influencia de Verena.

—¿Y lo que usted quiere es que yo no la desilusione?

—Lo que no deseo es que sea usted hipócrita… en el caso de que no tome nuestro partido. Pero creo que sería muy hermoso que la querida anciana pueda ver realizada su ilusión. Es probable que no tenga una larga vida; el otro día me dijo que ya estaba preparada para su reposo eterno; así que eso no interferirá demasiado con la libertad de usted. Ella ve todo el asunto desde un punto de vista bastante romántico… Un hombre del Sur, naturalmente sin ninguna simpatía por las ideas de Boston, y aquel encuentro de ustedes en la calle; y la manera en que se le presentó. No puede imaginarse que yo no logre convencerlo.

—No tema, señorita Tarrant, la contentaremos —dijo Ransom, y se echó a reír, aunque advirtió que ella solo parcialmente lo comprendía.

Se vio imposibilitado para hacerse entender con mayor claridad debido al regreso del señor Burrage, trayendo no solo el vaso de agua de Verena sino a un anciano de cutis sonrosado y suave sonrisa, con una chaqueta de terciopelo y un fino cabello blanco, bien peinado, y a quien presentó a Verena. Era un nombre que Ransom reconoció como el de un rico y venerable ciudadano, célebre por sus actividades sociales y su filantropía. Ransom vivía en Nueva York desde hacía suficiente tiempo como para saber que una petición de aquel anciano opulento de ser presentado a la señorita Tarrant significaba que esta última había obtenido la aprobación del sector más respetable, y eliminaba cualquier elemento de vulgaridad en su triunfo; y mientras se retiraba un débil suspiro apenas perceptible se le escapó de los labios, dictado por el sentimiento de pertenecer a una minoría terriblemente reducida y oscura. Se había retirado porque, como ya sabemos, había aprendido que un caballero debía hacer eso cuando al hablar con una dama un nuevo caballero era presentado; aunque al volver atrás la mirada observó que el joven Burrage no mostraba ninguna intención de abdicar en favor del famoso filántropo. Pensó que lo mejor sería volver a casa; no sabía qué

podía suceder en una fiesta como aquella, ni cuándo se disolvería la reunión; después de pensarlo un momento, pareció desechar la idea de que Verena volviera a tomar la palabra. Deseaba saber dónde vivía Verena; quería volver a verla a solas, no en un salón como aquel, rodeada de millonarios. Mientras miraba a su alrededor, en busca de la anfitriona, se le ocurrió que tal vez ella lo supiera, y que si lograba vencer su timidez, al menos como para hacer esa pregunta, la señora Burrage se lo diría. Una vez que vio que la señora no se encontraba en el gran salón comenzó a buscarla por las distintas salas, donde los huéspedes eran ya mucho menos numerosos. Entró una vez más a la sala de música, ocupada por solo una media docena de parejas entretenidas en conversaciones íntimas en medio de las sillas vacías, y allí descubrió a la señora Burrage conversando con Olive Chancellor (esta última, por lo visto, no se había movido de su sitio), sentadas frente a la tribuna desierta donde había tenido lugar el triunfo de Verena. Era tan poco lo que le interesaba hablar con Olive que al verla casi vaciló en acercarse; pero se dio ánimos y avanzó en el mejor estilo de los caballeros de Mississippi. Observó el recibimiento que le dirigían los ojos de Olive; ella lo miró como si hubiera sido precisamente la esperanza de no volver a verlo lo que la había hecho permanecer marginada. La señora Burrage se levantó cuando él se despidió, y Olive siguió su ejemplo.

—Me alegra mucho que haya venido. Esa joven es una criatura maravillosa, ¿no es cierto? Podrá lograr todo lo que se proponga.

Estas palabras de la anciana fueron recibidas al principio con una reserva que, esperaba, fuera tomada como una demostración de extremo respeto; y en efecto, en su silencio había una especie de solemnidad sureña. Luego dijo, en un tono igualmente ponderado:

—Sí, señora; también yo pienso que nunca antes había asistido a una exhibición, a un entretenimiento que me haya encantado tanto.

—Me alegra que le haya gustado. No sabía precisamente qué ofrecer, y esta, por lo visto, fue una maravillosa inspiración… tanto para mí como para la señorita Tarrant. La señorita Chancellor me decía en este momento lo mucho que han trabajado juntas; es algo realmente muy hermoso. La señorita Chancellor es colega y una gran amiga de la señorita Tarrant. Esta última me decía que no puede hacer nada sin ella. —Después de

esta explicación la señora Burrage se volvió hacia Olive y murmuró—: Permítame presentarle al señor… al señor…

Pero se había olvidado del nombre del pobre Ransom, había olvidado quién le había pedido enviar una invitación; y, al advertirlo, él mismo salió en su ayuda diciéndole que en cierto modo era primo de la señorita Olive, si es que ella no lo repudiaba, y que él sabía lo tremendamente estrecha que era la relación existente entre ambas jóvenes.

—Cuando yo aplaudía a quien aplaudía era a la empresa, es decir, también a usted —le dijo sonriendo a su prima.

—¿Aplausos? ¿Usted? Confieso que no le entiendo —respondió Olive inmediatamente.

—Pues bien, a decir verdad, yo tampoco.

—Oh, sí, por supuesto; precisamente por eso, precisamente por eso… —Y estas palabras de la señora Burrage, en referencia a las relaciones entre el joven y su acompañante, se disolvieron también en la vaguedad. Había estado a punto de decir que esa era la razón por la cual él se encontraba en su casa; pero se detuvo a tiempo pensando que no era indicado hacer una alusión de ese tipo. Basil Ransom admiró en ella a la mujer que sabía salir bien de un atolladero y comprendió toda la importancia que tenía. Sus modales eran vivaces, familiares, ligeramente impacientes, y si no hubiese sido porque hablaba con demasiada rapidez y carecía de la suavidad de ciertas matronas del Sur, le hubiera recordado a un tipo de mujeres conocidas en los viejos tiempos, antes de que ocurrieran los cambios en la parte del mundo que era la suya; el tipo de la propietaria inteligente, capaz y hospitalaria, viuda o soltera, de una gran plantación que ella misma manejaba—. Si es usted su primo, acompañe a la señorita Chancellor a comer algo en vez de marcharse —dijo con resultados poco felices, pues Olive se volvió a sentar instantáneamente.

—Muchísimas gracias… pero no ceno nunca. No me moveré de este salón, me gusta mucho.

—Entonces permítame que le haga traer algo… o tal vez aquí el señor… su primo desee hacerle compañía.

Olive le dirigió a la señora Burrage una mirada implorante.

—Estoy muy fatigada; prefiero quedarme a descansar un poco; los actos de este género me dejan siempre exhausta.

—Ah, me lo puedo imaginar perfectamente. Bueno, entonces quédese tranquila… después volveré a verla. —Y con una sonrisa de despedida dirigida hacia Basil Ransom, la señora Burrage se retiró.

Basil se quedó un momento dubitativo, aunque vio que Olive deseaba desembarazarse de su presencia. En cualquier caso, se atrevió a dirigirle la palabra.

—No quiero molestarla, solo me permitiré hacerle una pregunta —dijo—. ¿En qué hotel están ustedes? Me gustaría visitar a la señorita Tarrant. No voy a decirle que me gustaría visitarla también a usted pues tengo el presentimiento de que eso no le procuraría el menor placer.

Se le ocurrió en ese momento que hubiera podido obtener la dirección de la señora Luna… recordaba vagamente que habitaban en la calle Diez… Y aunque ella se hubiera ofendido no podía negarse a darle las señas; pero de pronto la pregunta directa dirigida a Olive con toda naturalidad y franqueza, aunque pudiera parecer un desafío, le había parecido preferible. Por supuesto que no podía presentarse ante Verena sin que Olive se enterase. No conocía nada, personalmente, de la vida en común de las dos amigas, pero se le ocurrió que lo que la señorita Chancellor más desaprobaba en él (¿no era cierto que en los mismos umbrales de su relación ella había tenido como una mística advertencia del peligro?) era la posibilidad de que él pudiera interferir en sus vidas. Y era indudable para él que de eso se trataba; sin embargo, lo decente era dirigirse a ella antes que a ninguna otra persona. Era mejor que su interferencia estuviera acompañada de todas las reglas de la urbanidad.

Olive no hizo ningún caso de su comentario sobre la manera en que ella recibiría su visita; pero le preguntó, un momento después, por qué consideraba necesario ver a la señorita Tarrant.

—Usted sabe que no le es simpático —añadió en un tono que tenía algo de suplicante y conmovedor, como para persuadirlo de que no pretendiera lo contrario.

No sé si Basil se sintió conmovido, pero dijo, con todas las apariencias de conciliación:

—Me gustaría agradecerle toda la interesante información que me ha proporcionado esta noche.

—Si piensa usted que es generoso ir a mofarse de ella, por supuesto, no tiene quién la defienda; quizá le agrade saber eso.

—Pero, mi querida señorita Chancellor, si usted no es una defensa… ¡Una batería de muchos cañones! —exclamó Ransom.

—Bueno, lo que es cierto es que para mí ella no es una defensa —respondió Olive poniéndose de pie.

Miró a su alrededor como si realmente estuviera sufriendo un castigo demasiado severo; jadeaba como una criatura acosada.

—Su defensa más segura es su inmunidad ante el ataque. Tal vez si usted no quiere decirme dónde viven, podrá ser lo suficientemente amable para pedirle a la señorita Tarrant que lo haga ella. ¿Me podría enviar una tarjeta?

—Vivimos en la calle Diez —dijo Olive, y le dio también el número—. Por supuesto es usted libre de ir a visitarla.

—Por supuesto que lo soy. ¿Por qué no debía serlo? Pero le estoy sumamente agradecido por esta información. Le pediré a la señorita Chancellor que salga conmigo, de modo que no tenga usted que soportar mi presencia.

Y se marchó con la impresión de que su prima era una criatura realmente insufrible, sobre todo por su capacidad para hacerlo sentirse siempre grosero. ¡Si era aquel el espíritu con que las mujeres se proponían entrar en acción cuando se sintieran más fuertes…!

XXIX

La señora Luna apareció al día siguiente muy temprano en el hotel y su hermana se preguntó sorprendida a qué debería el honor de recibir una visita suya a las once de la mañana. Muy pronto lo supo, cuando Adeline le preguntó si había sido ella quien le había enviado a Basil Ransom una invitación para la reunión en casa de la señora Burrage.

—¿Yo? ¿Por qué iba yo a enviársela? —preguntó Olive, sintiendo en cierto momento un latido de angustia al deducir que no había sido Adeline, como había supuesto.

—No lo sé, pero como tú parecías preocuparte por él…

—¿Qué dices, Adeline Luna? ¿Cuándo me he…? —exclamó la señorita Chancellor, con la mirada fija e intensamente grave.

—¿No me vas a decir que ya no recuerdas que fuiste tú quien lo invitó a visitarte hace año y medio?

—Yo no lo invité, solo le dije que si por casualidad pasaba por Boston viniera a verme.

—Sí, me acuerdo muy bien de cómo ocurrió todo; resultó que por casualidad pasó y que lo detestaste y trataste de desembarazarte de él.

La señorita Chancellor vio, como he dicho, el porqué Adeline había ido a verla a la hora en que sabía que ella escribía siempre su correspondencia, después de haberle prestado toda la atención que había considerado necesaria el día anterior; había ido simplemente a hacerle una de las escenas desagradables que Olive conocía tan bien desde hacía mucho tiempo. Le parecía que Adeline había sido ya bastante desagradable al no haber logrado inducir a Basil Ransom al matrimonio, de acuerdo con aquel cálculo de posibilidades al que se entregó (con una licencia que no deseaba recordar

demasiado explícitamente) cuando la pareja se había conocido ante sus mismos ojos en la casa de Charles Street, y cuando la señora Luna parecía interesarse en él tanto como ella podía interesarse. Olive lo hubiera aceptado de muy buena gana como cuñado, pues el daño que una relación de ese tipo podía causarle era tan definido como limitado; mientras que, en lo referente a su libertad para entrometerse en la vida de ella, la capacidad que el joven de Mississippi había demostrado para herirla parecía inmensa.

—Aquella vez le escribí por una razón perfectamente definida —dijo—. Pensé que a nuestra madre le habría gustado que lo conociéramos. Pero todo fue un error.

—¿Cómo puedes saber que fue un error? A nuestra madre le habría gustado; de eso no me cabe duda.

—Me refiero a mi modo de actuar; fue por un sentimiento del deber que permití que me oprimiera demasiado. Siempre lo hago. El deber tendría que ser una cosa evidente, no algo a lo que se tuviera que dar caza.

—¿Era un sentimiento del deber muy evidente el que te trajo aquí? —le preguntó la señora Luna, que por lo visto estaba de pésimo humor.

Olive se quedó mirando por un momento la punta de sus zapatos.

—Tenía la idea de que para estas fechas ya te habrías casado con él —observó repentinamente.

—Mucho mejor sería que fueras tú quien se casara con él, querida. ¿Cómo es posible que se te ocurriera algo semejante?

—Al principio me escribiste tanto sobre él. Me decías que era muy atento y que te gustaba.

—Sus intenciones son una cosa y las mías son otra. ¿Cómo podría yo casarme con todos los hombres que me rodean y me rondan? ¡También podría convertirme en una mormona de la noche a la mañana! —La señora Luna enunció estas ideas con cierto aire de condescendencia, como si no pudiera esperar que su hermana entendiera su situación personal.

Olive cortó la discusión, conformándose sencillamente con decir:

—Yo estaba segura de que eras tú quien le había enviado la invitación.

—¿Yo, querida? Eso hubiera estado completamente en oposición con mi actitud de disuasión.

—Entonces fue ella sencillamente quien le envió la invitación.

—¿A quién te refieres cuando dices «ella»?

—A la señora Burrage, por supuesto.

—Pensaba que te referías a Verena —dijo la señora Luna, fingiendo un tono casual.

—¿Verena? ¿A él? ¿Por qué había de hacerlo? —Y la mirada de Olive se volvió tan fría como su hermana había visto en otras ocasiones.

—¿Por qué no hubiera podido hacerlo? Ella también lo conoce.

—Lo había visto dos veces en su vida antes de esa noche, cuando lo encontró por tercera vez y habló con él.

—¿Ella te ha dicho eso?

—Me lo dice todo.

—¿Estás segura?

—Adeline Luna, ¿qué estás insinuando? —murmuró la señorita Chancellor.

—¿Estás segura de que ayer se vieron solo por tercera vez? —insistió la señora Luna.

Olive irguió la cabeza y miró a su hermana desde el sombrero hasta el último lazo del vestido.

—No tienes ningún derecho a insinuar nada semejante a menos que sepas algo.

—Oh, lo sé; en cualquier caso sé más que tú.

Y entonces la señora Luna, sentándose con su hermana junto a una de las ventanas del amplio, cálido y abigarrado salón del hotel de la calle Diez, donde había una alfombra frente a la chimenea que representaba a un perro de Terranova salvando a un niño de morir ahogado, y una hilera de litografías en las paredes, le comunicó la impresión que había recibido la noche anterior, la impresión que le produjo la irrefrenable curiosidad de Ransom por Verena Tarrant. Verena debía haberle pedido a la señora Burrage que le enviara una invitación, y lo había hecho sin mencionárselo a Olive; de otra manera, ¿no era cierto que se acordaría de ello? Era inútil pensar que la señora Burrage lo había invitado por su propia iniciativa, ya que hasta ese momento no estaba enterada de su existencia, ¿por qué debería estarlo? El mismo Basil Ransom le había dicho que no

conocía a la señora Burrage. La señora Luna sabía a quién conocía él y a quién no, o, al menos, al tipo de gente que frecuentaba, y esta no pertenecía al Club de los Miércoles. Esa era una de las razones por las que a ella no le interesaba sostener una relación íntima con él, porque parecía no tener ningún gusto especial para hacer amistades agradables. Olive sabía perfectamente cuál era su gusto a ese respecto, aunque su joven hermana no lo compartiera. Lo único seguro era que Verena había sugerido que le enviaran una invitación. De cualquier modo Olive podía preguntárselo, o si tenía miedo de que la joven le dijera una mentira, se lo podía preguntar a la señora Burrage. Aunque lo más probable era que la señora Burrage estuviera de acuerdo con Verena y podía inventar alguna otra versión; por consiguiente lo mejor sería que Olive creyera en lo que también ella creía: que Verena había insistido en que el joven estuviera presente en la reunión y que debía de tener razones personales para ello. Era de temerse que el comentario que Ransom le había hecho a la señora Luna la noche anterior respecto a que esta había perdido la cabeza estaba muy cerca de ser la verdad; pues, de no ser porque el rencor la había cegado, habría podido imaginar el horror que le inspiraría a su hermana al hablar tan livianamente de mentiras atribuibles a Verena y a la señora Burrage. ¿Mentían hasta ese punto las personas que vivían en el ambiente de la señora Luna? Olive no mentía nunca y, al atribuir una disposición similar a las personas que ella quería, le era imposible imaginar que Verena hubiese tenido la intención de engañarla. La señora Luna, en un momento de mayor tranquilidad, también hubiera podido adivinar que Olive haría sus reflexiones personales sobre la extraña historia del cortejo de Basil Ransom a Verena por despecho ante el rechazo de Adeline; pues esa era la versión del asunto que ella le estaba ofreciendo a la señorita Chancellor. Olive hizo dos cosas: escuchó con viva atención y con impaciencia, con la sensación de que un peligro bien definido pendía en la atmósfera (del que, sin embargo, no había querido que la señora Luna le hablara, pues lo había percibido por sí misma la noche anterior); y observó que la pobre Adeline estaba fabricando una historia, que su «rechazo» era una absoluta invención. El señor Ransom evidentemente estaba interesado en Verena, pero no había necesitado la crueldad de Adeline para ello. Por eso Olive mantuvo una actitud de gran reserva: no se tomó la molestia de anunciar que su propia versión era que Adeline, por razones del todo incomprensibles para los

demás, había tratado de atrapar a Basil Ransom, había fracasado en su intento, y estaba furiosa al ver que Verena era preferida a una persona de su rango (Olive recordaba la *spretae injuria formae*), y solo deseaba en ese momento hacerles daño a él y a la joven. Esto hubiera sucedido si hubiese podido inducir a Olive a intervenir en el asunto. La señorita Chancellor estaba dispuesta a intervenir, pero no porque le preocuparan las humillaciones de Adeline. Ni siquiera estoy seguro de que no considerara el fiasco sufrido como una última prueba de la incapacidad total de su hermana, y tal vez la despreció aún más por eso; Olive sostenía siempre que no encontraba nada más vulgar que el deseo de atrapar a un hombre, y consideraba que se llegaba a los límites de lo innoble cuando se debía renunciar, por incapacidad, a esa empresa. Olive se cuidó de no manifestar estas opiniones, pero llegó hasta el punto de decirle a su hermana que no podía entender por qué le molestaba que él dirigiera su atención hacia Verena. ¿Qué era Verena para ella?

—Vaya, Olive Chancellor, ¿cómo puedes preguntármelo? —respondió arrogantemente la señora Luna—. ¿No significa Verena todo para ti, y no lo eres tú todo para mí, y no sería un golpe que te lastimaría tremendamente el que él tratara, tratara con éxito, de arrebatarte a Verena, y no iba a sufrir yo, que, como sabes, sufro por pura empatía?

Ya he dicho que la señorita Chancellor nunca mentía, pero semejante propósito era compatible con una consideración especial por la verdad, que la hacía resistirse a manifestarla en ocasiones de tan poca importancia. Así que no dijo: «¡Dios mío, Adeline, qué alboroto eres capaz de armar! ¡Sabes perfectamente bien que detestas a Verena y que te haría feliz saber que se hubiese ahogado!», sino que solo dijo:

—Bueno, ya veo, pero todo esto es muy complicado.

De lo único que se daba cuenta era de que la señora Luna estaba ansiosa por ayudarla a detener el paso de Basil Ransom, y el que su acción estuviera dictada por el resentimiento y no por la ternura hacia las bostonianas no habría hecho que su ayuda fuera menos bien recibida si el peligro era real. Ella misma tenía un miedo cerval, un miedo que se le presentaba en todas las ocasiones; es más, era posible que Adeline hubiera visto algo, ¿qué quería decir, por ejemplo, cuando se refería a encuentros secretos entre Verena y Basil Ransom? Cuando la interrogó sobre este punto, la señora

Luna solo pudo decir que no pretendía dar ninguna información definitiva, y que de cualquier modo ella no era una espía, pero que la noche anterior él había proclamado abiertamente en su cara sus sentimientos de admiración por la muchacha, su entusiasmo por el modo en que se erguía sobre el escenario. Por supuesto él aborrecía sus ideas, pero era tan petulante que estaba seguro de que lograría hacérselas olvidar. Tal vez todo esto estaba dirigido contra ella… ¡como si a ella pudiera importarle! También dependía en gran parte de la muchacha; por supuesto que si había alguna posibilidad de que Verena resultara afectada, le aconsejaba a Olive que la vigilara. Sabía perfectamente qué hacer; era deber de Adeline ponerla al corriente de sus propias impresiones, se lo agradeciera Olive o no. Solo quería ponerla en guardia, y era típico de Olive recibir sus informes con tal frialdad; era la mujer más desilusionante que había conocido en su vida.

La frialdad de la señorita Chancellor no disminuyó por este reproche, ya que se le había ocurrido que, después de todo, ella misma no había hablado abiertamente con Adeline: nunca le había hecho ver la intensidad real de su deseo de mantener alejado el género de peligro que en ese momento se cernía sobre Verena, no le había proporcionado ningún indicio que la hiciera creer que ella era la guardiana de su amiga; y por eso la sorprendió la grosería de pensamiento de la señora Luna al asumir que estaba dispuesta a entrar en una conspiración para aislar y frustrar los intentos de la muchacha. Olive echó mano de toda su dignidad para disipar esa impresión, y si bien no pudo dejar de observar que de esa manera la señora Luna se enfurecía aún más, sintió que debía más bien desencantarla antes que confiarse a ella… sobre todo por estar tan intensamente ávida de obtener provecho con sus advertencias.

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La señora Luna se hubiera sentido aún más desilusionada por la manera en que Olive recibió su propuesta de colaboración de haber sabido cuántas confidencias aquella joven reticente le hubiera podido hacer a su vez. Toda la vida de Olive se reducía ahora a una red de comunicaciones susurradas; ella misma sintió esto cuando se refugió en su habitación después de la entrevista con su hermana. Por el momento tenía tiempo de pensar, porque Verena había salido a dar un paseo con el señor Burrage, quien había concertado una cita con ella la noche precedente para pasar a recogerla por la mañana. Tenían otros compromisos para esa tarde; el principal de todos era reunirse con un grupo de gente seria en la casa de una de las grandes promotoras de la causa en la ciudad. Olive acompañaría a Verena a esas reuniones tan pronto como comieran; se ilusionaba con la idea de poder ajustar el horario de tal manera que no hubiera ni siquiera media hora en el día en que Basil Ransom pudiera encontrar a las bostonianas en el hotel. Esto se lo había propuesto desde el momento en que en casa de la señora Burrage le había tenido que dar por fuerza su dirección, y también había decidido pedirle a Verena, como un favor especial, que regresara con ella a Boston dentro de dos días; es decir, a la mañana siguiente. Se había hablado demasiado sobre la posibilidad de que Verena permaneciera unos cuantos días con la señora Burrage después de la partida de Olive; pero Verena había renunciado espontáneamente viendo cómo aquella idea mortificaba a su amiga. Olive había aceptado el sacrificio, y la estancia de ambas en Nueva York se vería limitada, al menos así pensaban, a cuatro días; uno de los cuales no obstante fue cancelado autoritariamente por la señorita Chancellor tan pronto como advirtió las intenciones de Basil Ransom. No se lo había comunicado aún a Verena; había dudado un poco, pues tenía una ligera mala conciencia sobre la concesión

que ya había obtenido de su amiga. Verena cedía de una manera tan generosa que le producía verdaderos remordimientos de conciencia una vez que había obtenido alguna concesión; y en ninguna ocasión le había oído Olive reclamar nada a cambio, ni lamentarse por un instante de los esfuerzos que se veía obligada a realizar. La idea de pasar una semana en casa de la señora Burrage la había fascinado; había dicho también que estaba segura de que su madre moriría feliz (aunque no había la menor perspectiva de una próxima defunción de la señora Tarrant) si se enteraba de que había tenido una experiencia de ese tipo; y sin embargo al advertir la gravedad con que Olive había recibido la noticia, al verla palidecer y turbarse ante aquella perspectiva, había ofrecido renunciar, con una sonrisa más dulce, si aún era posible, que cualquier otra que hubiese visto en sus ojos. Olive sabía lo que eso significaba, sabía las reservas de felicidad que tenía en perspectiva, a pesar de la tensión que les exigía su esfuerzo común, su trabajo vital, que ahora había llegado, las dos se daban perfectamente cuenta de ello, a la etapa de realización, de cosecha; y precisamente por ello le remordía un poco la conciencia al aceptar esa última renuncia, especialmente ahora que su posición parecía del todo segura, por parte de una persona que se le había entregado tan sublimemente.

Por muy segura que pudiera considerar su posición, Olive se calificó de ciega e idiota por haber, a pesar de su primera negativa, aceptado llevar a Verena a Nueva York. Verena había recibido aquella invitación con saltos de júbilo; el mismo hecho de que nadie esperara algo semejante de parte de la señora Burrage —parecía una idea extraña procediendo de una mujer enteramente mundana—, entrañaba ya una especie de persuasión. La reacción inmediata de Olive había sido la de un vago e instintivo temor, pero más tarde había logrado desprenderse de él; había decidido (y esa decisión no era nueva en ella) que por tratarse de la causa era necesario afrontar también aquella situación. Semejante oportunidad podía contribuir mucho a la reputación de Verena como para justificar el rechazo a los temores que después de todo no eran sino muy vagos. Los terrores y peligros que Olive veía a su alrededor se habían atenuado mucho ya para aquellas fechas; hacía siglos que Basil Ransom no había dado señales de vida, y Henry Burrage se había apaciguado antes de que ellas partieran rumbo a Europa. Si a la madre de este último se le había ocurrido convertir a Verena en la principal

animadora de una gran *soirée* actuaba por lo menos de buena fe, ya que no se podía pensar que tuviera mayores deseos de que él se casara con la hija de Selah Tarrant de los que había tenido un año atrás. Y además, ellas debían hacerle algún bien a los ciegos, a los más ciegos, los ciegos del mundo elegante; tal vez llegara a enfurecerlos, pero también eso podía ser bueno. Últimamente Olive era consciente de una tentación personal en ese sentido; no era insensible al orgullo de aparecer en un distinguido círculo neoyorquino como una mujer representativa, una bostoniana importante, la mentora, colega y asociada de una de las más originales jóvenes de la época. Basil Ransom era la persona que menos había esperado encontrar en casa de la señora Burrage; había creído que debían fácilmente pasar cuatro días en una ciudad de más de un millón de habitantes sin tener que sufrir ese desagradable accidente. Pero el hecho había tenido lugar y todo hacía parecer que se trataba de algo grave. Con los dientes apretados se reprochó con toda la dureza de que era capaz haber caído en esa trampa del destino. Bueno, de cualquier modo saldría bien librada, quizá solo con algún rasguño. Henry Burrage era muy atento, pero de cualquier manera ya no le temía; y era más que natural que el joven tuviera la impresión de no ser lo bastante cortés con ellas, después de que hubieran accedido a ser explotadas por su madre en aquel medio mundano. El otro peligro era el peor: aquel extraño temor que sintió que la embargaba la noche de la reunión en casa de la señorita Birdseye volvió a invadirla. El señor Burrage le llegó a parecer hasta una protección; pensó con alivio que habían decidido que después de llevar a Verena a pasear por el parque y ver el Museo de Arte por la mañana, cenarían con él en Delmonico's (él había invitado ya a otro caballero) y luego asistirían a la ópera alemana. Olive había mantenido todo esto oculto, sin revelarle a su hermana su previsión de que Basil Ransom se quedara perplejo cuando llegara al hotel de la calle Diez y se enterase de que habían salido, ni le había expresado su ansiedad por encontrarse una vez más en el tren de Boston. Solo esa previsión la había mantenido serena cuando le dio su dirección al señor Ransom.

Verena se presentó en el hotel poco antes del almuerzo y acudió a la habitación de su amiga para notificarle su llegada; y mientras permanecían sentadas, esperando taparse los oídos cuando el gong que anunciaba el almuerzo fuera golpeado por el negro de chaqueta blanca al pie de la escalera, le contó a su amiga todas sus aventuras con el

señor Burrage: se extendió en el relato de las bellezas del parque, el esplendor del museo, la asombrosa familiaridad del joven con todo lo que contenía, la agilidad de sus caballos, la comodidad de su vehículo inglés, el placer de deslizarse sobre ruedas tan sólidas como el mármol, las diversiones que prometía para esa noche. Olive la escuchaba en silencio; advirtió que Verena estaba extasiada, por supuesto que la conocía tan bien como para poder entender esa fase.

—¿Trató el señor Burrage de hacerte la corte? —le preguntó al final, sin sonreír.

Verena se había quitado el sombrero para arreglarle una pluma, y, colocándolo de nuevo sobre su cabeza, formando un marco para el rostro con los brazos levantados, respondió:

—Bueno, sí, supongo que estaba tratando de declararme su amor.

Olive esperó que ella le dijera más, que le dijera cómo lo había tratado, cómo lo había mantenido a raya, haciéndole comprender que esa cuestión estaba resuelta desde hacía mucho tiempo; pero como Verena no añadió nada más, ella no insistió, consciente como siempre de que en una relación como la suya, cada una de las partes debía guardar un profundo respeto por la libertad de la otra. Hasta entonces nunca había violado la libertad de Verena, y por supuesto no era el momento de comenzar a hacerlo. Es más, ante las preguntas que pensaba dirigirle pensó que debía ser discreta. Se preguntaba si Henry Burrage no tendría intenciones de volver a la carga y si su madre no habría actuado exclusivamente por el interés de su hijo al invitarlas. El único lado positivo que aquella situación podía presentar era que si le hacía caso no se lo haría a Basil Ransom; la noche anterior había llegado hasta a decirle a Olive, cuando las acompañaba a su carruaje, que esperaba poder convencerla de que se había convertido a su evangelio. Pero la antigua enfermedad se ensañó nuevamente con ella; supo lo que era el desaliento cuando se preguntó por qué en nombre de Dios Verena podía dar oídos a todos y no solo a Olive Chancellor. Nuevamente debió admitir, al ver el brillo, la expresión feliz de la muchacha, como lo había hecho en los primeros meses, que el gran problema era ese punto flaco de Verena, la falta de firmeza que ella le había reprochado tan pronto como comenzaron a vivir juntas, cuando le dijo: «Voy a decirte cuál es tu problema; tú no detestas a los hombres como especie» (le volvía ahora a la mente la imborrable impresión producida por la explícita admisión de su amiga).

Verena había dicho: «Es verdad, cuando son agradables no me disgustan». ¡Como si la atrocidad organizada pudiera ser agradable! A Olive le disgustaban más cuando menos desagradables pudieran ser. Después de unos momentos, refiriéndose a Henry Burrage, observó:

—No me parece correcto de su parte, ni decente, pretenderte después de que le hicieras saber, cuando aún estaba en Cambridge, que te aburría y torturaba.

—Oh, no di ninguna señal de comprenderlo —dijo Verena, alegremente—. Estoy aprendiendo a disimular —añadió un momento después—. Supongo que es necesario hacerlo para avanzar. Finjo no advertir sus intenciones.

En ese momento sonó el gong para el almuerzo y las dos jóvenes se cubrieron los oídos, una frente a la otra, Verena con su sonrisa alegre, Olive pálida y severa. Cuando pudieron oír nuevamente sus palabras, Olive preguntó abruptamente:

—¿Cómo pudo invitar la señora Burrage a Basil Ransom? Él le dijo a Adeline que nunca antes la había visto.

—Fui yo quien le pedí que lo invitara… cuando me escribió para darme las gracias, y se establecieron los detalles de este viaje. En su carta me preguntaba si tenía yo amigos en la ciudad a quienes me gustaría invitar, y le di el nombre del señor Ransom.

Verena habló sin un solo instante de duda, y la única señal de cierto embarazo que demostró fue la de ponerse de pie, para librarse de la mirada escrutadora de Olive. Le fue fácil reprimir su nerviosismo, porque estaba feliz de que se le ofreciera aquella ocasión. Se había propuesto ser muy simple en todas las relaciones con su amiga, y por supuesto esto no era posible si comenzaba a ocultarle ciertas cosas. Eran muy pocas las cosas que podía ocultar y le pareció remediar su omisión contestando de inmediato a la pregunta de Olive.

—Nunca me lo habías dicho —comentó la señorita Chancellor en voz baja.

—No quería hacerlo. Sé que él te disgusta y pensé que te fastidiaría. Pero quería que estuviera presente. Quería que escuchara.

—¿Qué importa eso? ¿Por qué tenías que preocuparte tanto de él?

—¡Debido a que se muestra tan decididamente contrario a nuestros ideales!

—¿Cómo lo sabes, Verena?

En ese momento Verena comenzó a dudar. Después de todo no era fácil esconderle solo un poco a Olive; era evidente que o se le decía todo o no se le decía nada. El primer camino resultaba demasiado duro; por eso había preferido mantener el episodio de la visita de Basil Ransom a Monadnoc Place sepultado en consideraciones no dichas; aquel era su único secreto en la vida, lo único que le pertenecía solo a ella. Le agradaba tanto decir todo aquello que era posible sin traicionarse a sí misma que solo después de haber hablado advirtió que corría el peligro de que Olive insistiera en interrogarla sobre el punto en que, para defenderse, se vería obligada a mentir; y a la vez era consciente de que en el momento en que su secreto se veía amenazado le era más querido. Comenzó a rogar silenciosamente que Olive no insistiera más; le resultaría odioso e insoportable tener que defenderse con una mentira. Mientras tanto debía responder algo, y el modo en que respondió fue exclamando, con más rapidez de lo que las reflexiones que anoto aquí permitirían suponer:

—Bueno, lo puedes deducir por su aspecto. Es el típico reaccionario.

Verena se encaminó hacia el espejo para ver si se había colocado bien el sombrero, y Olive se levantó con desgana, como lo haría una persona que no tuviera el menor deseo de comer.

—Déjalo que reaccione como quiera, por el amor del cielo, no le hagas caso —fue la respuesta de la señorita Chancellor, y Verena sintió que aquella no había expresado todo lo que tenía en mente. Deseó bajar a comer, pues ella, la verdad sea dicha, tenía muchísimo apetito. Llegó a sospechar que Olive tenía una idea que no se atrevía a expresar, tanta era la zozobra que comportaba—. Lo sabes muy bien, Verena, esta no es nuestra vida real, no es nuestro trabajo —concluyó.

—Por supuesto que no lo es —dijo Verena, sin fingir al principio que no entendía lo que Olive quería decir. Un momento después añadió—: ¿Te refieres a mi trato social con el señor Burrage?

—No solo a eso —respondió Olive abruptamente, mirándola—. ¿Cómo sabías su dirección?

—¿Su dirección?

—La del señor Ransom… para solicitar que la señora Burrage lo invitara.

Por un momento intercambiaron miradas.

—Estaba escrita en una carta que recibí de él.

Ante estas palabras el rostro de Olive adoptó una expresión tal que su compañera corrió hacia ella desde el otro lado de la habitación y la tomó de la mano. Pero el tono con que la acogió era diferente del que Verena esperaba. Olive le dijo con expresión de fría sorpresa:

—¡Así que mantenéis correspondencia! —Era evidente que hacía un inmenso esfuerzo para dominarse.

—Me escribió una sola vez… nunca te lo dije —respondió Verena sonriendo.

Sintió que los extraños e inquietos ojos de su amiga la taladraban hasta lo más profundo; un poco más y podrían llegar hasta el fondo de su alma. Bueno, podían hacerlo si eso deseaba; después de todo, llegadas las cosas a este extremo, su secreto le importaba menos. Sin embargo, por el momento, Verena no supo qué fue lo que Olive descubrió, ya que solo comentó que era hora de bajar al comedor. Mientras descendían la escalera tomó del brazo a la señorita Chancellor y pudo advertir que esta estaba temblando.

Por supuesto había en Nueva York mucha gente interesada en el movimiento, y Olive había concertado muchas citas anticipadamente, que les ocuparon la tarde entera. Todo el mundo quería conversar con ellas y Verena descubrió qué fácilmente podían ponerse de moda solo con permanecer en la ciudad y explotar aquella veta. Pero, como Olive había precisado, aquella no era su verdadera vida, ni le parecía que la gente tomara con tanta pasión su causa como ocurría en Boston; sin embargo, había algo en aquella atmósfera que la embargaba con un sentimiento de amplitud y variedad: eran las posibilidades incalculables de una gran ciudad, las cuales —Verena no sabía si debía reconocerlo sinceramente— hubieran podido suplir la seriedad de Boston. Era evidente que la gente parecía mucho más vivaz, y que en ningún otro lugar llovían como allí los comentarios alentadores, debido a electrizantes tentáculos que se extendían por doquier. El centro principal parecía ser la casa de la señora Croucher, situada en la calle Cincuenta y seis, donde hubo una reunión informal de simpatizantes de la causa que no parecieron dispuestas a perdonarla cuando supieron que la noche anterior había hablado en un círculo al que ninguna de ellas pertenecía. Por supuesto eran personas muy diferentes a las que integraban el grupo al que se había dirigido en casa de la

señora Burrage, y Verena emitió un silencioso y secreto suspiro que pretendía expresar algo de su desesperanza cuando pensó en lo enormemente complicado que era el mundo, y en los muchos elementos que lo integraban. La petición general era que repitiera todo el discurso en un ambiente más afín; pero la joven respondió que Olive había establecido todos sus compromisos, y que como su discurso tenía solo por objetivo interesar a personas ajenas a la causa consideraba que las amigas de la señora Croucher se hallaban situadas en un nivel superior. Fue lo suficientemente prudente como para decir eso, pues percibía que a Olive lo único que en esos momentos le importaba era que llegara la hora de marcharse de la ciudad; por eso no quería comprometerse a nada. Cuando descubrió antes del almuerzo que su amiga estaba temblando se había sentido en realidad muy mal, dándose cuenta de lo mucho que Olive se sentía ligada a ella y con qué terrible intensidad sufría la menor desviación. Cuando se dispusieron a iniciar el cumplimiento de sus varios compromisos sociales, la primera cosa que Verena le dijo, una vez en el carruaje (Olive había alquilado uno para todo el día con su habitual generosidad), fue que su correspondencia con el señor Ransom había consistido de parte de él en una sola carta, y muy breve, por añadidura. La había recibido hacía poco más de un mes. Olive sabía que recibía cartas de algunos caballeros; no veía por qué se le daba tanta importancia precisamente a esa. La señorita Chancellor se inclinaba hacia un lado en el asiento del carruaje, muy quieta, muy grave, con la cabeza apoyada contra la superficie acojinada, con los ojos fijos en la muchacha.

—Eres tú la que le atribuyes importancia; de otra manera me lo habrías comunicado.

—Pensaba que te desagradaría… ya que él te disgusta.

—No me refiero a él —dijo Olive—; para mí él no significa nada. —Luego añadió, repentinamente—: ¿Has visto acaso que yo tema enfrentarme a lo que me disgusta?

Verena no podía decir que sí, y sin embargo no le parecía justo por parte de Olive que dijera que era una persona a quien resultaba fácil comunicarle ciertas cosas; el modo como permanecía allí, pálida y débil, como una criatura herida, demostraba en demasía lo contrario.

—Tienes una extraordinaria capacidad de sufrimiento —respondió un momento después.

Olive no respondió nada; pero poco después dijo en la misma actitud:

—Sí, puedes hacerme sufrir mucho.

Verena le tomó una mano y la mantuvo entre las suyas.

—Nunca lo haré; de otra manera también yo sufriría.

—Tú no has nacido para sufrir, has nacido para disfrutar —dijo Olive con el mismo tono en que le había reprochado que no detestara a los hombres como especie, un tono que deseaba implicar que lo contrario hubiera sido mucho más natural y tal vez lo más noble.

Tal vez fuera así, pero Verena no se sintió capaz de rechazar aquella acusación. Lo comprendía muy bien mientras desde la ventanilla del carruaje dirigía la mirada a la brillante y animada ciudad, donde los elementos de atracción parecían tan numerosos, la animación tan inmensa, las tiendas tan brillantes, las mujeres tan extraordinariamente bien vestidas, y sabía que todas aquellas cosas despertaban su curiosidad, le aceleraban el pulso.

—Bueno, supongo que no debo abusar de ello —comentó, volviendo la mirada hacia Olive con su dulzura natural y su actitud de condescendencia.

Olive se llevó una mano a los labios y la mantuvo allí durante un instante; aquel ademán parecía querer expresar: «Cuando como ahora eres tan encantadoramente dócil, ¿cómo no voy a sentir terror de perderte?». Sin embargo no llegó a expresar esa idea, y Olive Chancellor, mientras el carruaje continuaba su marcha, dijo palabras enteramente distintas:

—Lo que no comprendo, Verena, es el motivo por el que te ha escrito.

—Me ha escrito porque le gusto. ¿Tal vez vas a decirme que no comprendes por qué le gusto? —dijo la muchacha riéndose—. Le gusté desde la primera vez que me vio.

—¡Oh, aquella vez! —murmuró Olive.

—Y aún más la segunda.

—¿Te dice eso en su carta? —preguntó la señorita Chancellor.

—Sí, querida, eso me dice. Solo que se expresó con mayor gracia.

Verena se sintió muy feliz al decir eso. Una frase escrita de Basil Ransom la justificaba.

—¡Ya lo había intuido…! ¡Tenía ese presentimiento! —exclamó Olive cerrando los ojos.

—Pensé que me habías dicho que no te era antipático.

—No es antipatía… es sencillamente miedo. ¿Es eso todo lo que ha habido entre vosotros?

—¡Vamos, Olive Chancellor! ¿Qué es lo que te imaginas? —preguntó Verena sintiendo que en ese momento se portaba como una cobarde.

Cinco minutos después le dijo a Olive que si eso le producía placer podían dejar Nueva York a la mañana siguiente, sin quedarse un cuarto día; y tan pronto como dijo esas palabras le pareció liberarse de un peso, especialmente cuando advirtió lo agradecida que le quedaba Olive por aquella concesión y con qué deleite recibió su oferta, y le dijo:

—Bueno… ¡si te has convencido de que esta no es nuestra vida, nuestra verdadera vida…!

Con esta frase y otras por el estilo, acompañadas de un beso indefinido, insólitamente lánguido, como si quisiera atestiguar que un día, después de todo, no importaba gran cosa, y a la vez aceptara el sacrificio y se sintiera un poco avergonzada por ello, quedó sellado el pacto de un inmediato regreso. Verena no podía ocultarse el hecho de que durante un mes había sido menos franca, y si quería hacer penitencia, esa reducción de su agradable estancia en Nueva York, aunque la hiciera perder casi definitivamente a Basil Ransom, era más fácil que decirle a Olive ahora que la carta no era todo, que había habido también una larga visita, una conversación y además un paseo que había ocultado durante varias semanas. ¿Y qué importancia podía tener no verlo? ¿Era tal vez un placer tan grande conversar con un caballero que solo deseaba —y Verena no podía imaginarse por qué lo deseaba— hacerle saber que la consideraba una persona absolutamente absurda? Olive la llevó de un lugar a otro, y ella terminó por no pensar en otra cosa que no fuera el presente inmediato, admirar la grandeza y la variedad de Nueva York, y dejarse transportar en el carruaje con almohadones de seda, y ver nuevas caras, nuevas expresiones de curiosidad y simpatía, que le aseguraban que era admirada y seguida. A todo eso se añadía la brillante idea de cenar esa noche en Delmonico’s y asistir a la ópera alemana. Había en el carácter de Verena una buena dosis de epicureísmo para ayudarla en determinadas ocasiones a encontrar agradable vivir solo en el momento presente.

XXXI

Cuando volvió con su compañera a su alojamiento de la calle Diez encontró dos tarjetas en la mesa del vestíbulo: una iba dirigida a la señorita Chancellor, la otra a ella. La caligrafía era diferente y sin embargo ella reconoció ambas. Olive estaba tras ella, en la escalera, hablando con el cochero para decirle que tuviera listo el coche para ellas dentro de media hora (tenían solo el tiempo preciso para vestirse); así que sencillamente tomó el sobre y subió a su habitación. Mientras lo hacía tenía la sensación de haber sabido siempre que aquella nota la esperaría, y era consciente de ser culpable de una especie de traición, de una astucia poco amistosa, y de no estar preparada para ello. Si podía deambular por Nueva York toda la tarde y olvidar que habría dificultades que afrontar en el futuro, eso no quería decir que las dificultades no existieran, y que podían ser considerables, ni tampoco que se resolverían simplemente con el regreso a Boston. Media hora más tarde, mientras recorría la Quinta Avenida con Olive (parecía que ese día estuviera especialmente poblada), ajustándose sus guantes ligeros, deseando que su abanico fuera un poco más elegante, y demostrando con la ávida mirada con que contemplaba las calles iluminadas por las farolas que fuera cual fuese la teoría que se pudiera sustentar sobre la génesis de su talento y su naturaleza personal, la sangre de los Tarrant, frecuentadores de conferencias e inveterados noctámbulos, corría impetuosamente por sus venas; mientras las dos jóvenes se dirigían hacia el célebre restaurante, ante cuya puerta el señor Burrage había prometido esperarlas celosamente, Verena encontró un tono de voz suficientemente alegre y natural como para comunicarle a su amiga que el señor Ransom se había presentado mientras estaban fuera y que le había dejado una nota con muchos saludos para la señorita Chancellor.

—Ese es un asunto que solo a ti te concierne, querida —replicó Olive, con un suspiro melancólico, dirigiendo la mirada a la calle Catorce (que atravesaban en aquel momento, con mucha agitación), hacia la extraña barrera del ferrocarril elevado.

No era nada nuevo para Verena el comprobar que aunque la gran aspiración de la vida de Olive fuera su entrega a la lucha en pro de la justicia, a veces no lograba aplicarla en ciertos casos específicos; pensó que era ya bastante tarde para declarar que las cartas del señor Ransom solo podían ser imputables a su corresponsal. ¿No había tomado Olive aquel asunto como cosa propia durante toda la tarde? Verena resolvió que debía informar a su compañera de todo lo necesario respecto a la carta; se preguntaba si al informarla ahora de más de lo que su amiga deseaba saber no la compensaba de todo lo que hasta ese momento le había ocultado.

—La llevó escrita esta tarde porque temía no encontrarme. Quiere verme mañana. Dice que tiene muchas cosas que decirme. Me propone una hora… dice que espera que no tenga inconveniente en verlo a eso de las once de la mañana; piensa que por ser tan temprano no tendré otros compromisos. Por supuesto nuestro regreso a Boston resuelve el asunto —añadió Verena serenamente.

La señorita Chancellor no dijo nada durante un minuto; luego respondió:

—A menos que lo invites a visitarte en el tren.

—¡Vamos, Olive, qué cortante puedes ser! —exclamó Verena, con genuina sorpresa.

Olive no podía justificar su amargura diciendo que su compañera había hablado como si se sintiera desilusionada, porque no había sido ese el tono de Verena. Así que sencillamente comentó:

—No sé qué tiene que decirte… Nada que valga la pena escuchar.

—Bueno, naturalmente representa el otro bando. Vive con esa obsesión —dijo Verena con una risa que pareció relegar todo el asunto a la categoría de las cosas sin importancia.

—¿Si tuviésemos que quedarnos lo recibirías a las once de la mañana? —preguntó Olive.

—¿Por qué me preguntas eso, cuando sabes que he abandonado la idea?

—¿Consideras que es un sacrificio demasiado terrible?

—No —dijo Verena de buen humor—, pero debo confesar que me produce curiosidad.

—¿Curiosidad…? ¿Qué quieres decir?

—Bueno, oír a la parte contraria.

—¡Santo cielo! —murmuró Olive, mirándola fijamente.

—Debes recordar que nunca he oído sus puntos de vista.

Y Verena sonrió ante la mirada estupefacta de su amiga.

—¿Deseas prestar oídos a todas las infamias que existen en este mundo?

—No, no se trata de eso. Pero mientras más cosas diga más argumentos me proporcionará. Creo que podría enfrentarme a él.

—La vida es demasiado breve. Déjalo tal como está.

—Bueno —continuó Verena—, hay muchas personas que no me he preocupado por conmover y por las cuales debería sentir más interés que por él. Pero hacerlo ceder en solo dos o tres posiciones… eso me gustaría más que cualquier otra cosa en el mundo.

—No tiene sentido iniciar una lucha desigual; y con el señor Ransom sería así.

—La desigualdad consistiría en que a mí me asiste la razón.

—¿Y qué significa eso… para un hombre? ¿Para qué les ha servido su brutalidad sino para enmascararse?

—No creo que sea brutal; me gustaría poder verlo —dijo Verena alegremente.

Los ojos de Olive permanecieron durante un momento fijos en los suyos; luego se volvieron hacia otra dirección, vagamente, con una mirada vacía, por la ventanilla del carruaje, y Verena se dijo que su aspecto era bastante extraño para ser el de una persona que asistía a una cena en Delmonico's. ¡Cuán terriblemente se preocupaba por todo y qué trágica era su naturaleza! ¡Qué ansiosa y suspicaz era! ¡Cuán vulnerable a las más insignificantes influencias! Durante su larga amistad, Verena había llegado a respetar la mayor parte de las peculiaridades del carácter de su amiga; las consideraba como una prueba de su profundidad y de su devoción a la causa, y estaban tan ligadas a aquello que de más noble había en ella que raramente se sentía tentada a criticarlas por separado. Pero en aquel momento, repentinamente, la seriedad de Olive le comenzó a parecer tan contraria a la armonía del universo como lo hubiera sido una sierra rota; se sintió enteramente satisfecha de no haberle hablado sobre la aparición de Basil Ransom

en Monadnoc Place. Si tanto se había afligido por lo que sabía, cuánto más se hubiera preocupado por el resto. En aquel momento Verena estaba convencida de que su relación con el señor Ransom era la más episódica, la más superficial, la más insignificante de todas las relaciones posibles.

Olive Chancellor observó a Henry Burrage muy atentamente esa noche; tenía una razón especial para hacerlo, y su diversión en las siguientes horas derivó mucho menos del delicado festín presidido por aquel insinuante prosélito, en el espléndido salón del restaurante, donde los camareros franceses se movían incesantemente sobre espesas alfombras y los grupos sentados en las mesas vecinas despertaban la curiosidad y suscitaban diversas conjeturas, o de la grandiosa música de *Lohengrin*, que de un proceso secreto de comparaciones y verificaciones que en breve le será explicado al lector. Ya que su imparcialidad ha quedado levemente desprestigiada es un placer poder decir que a su regreso de la ópera, Olive tomó una decisión dictada por una grave consideración de justicia… respecto a la rapidez con que Verena le había comunicado haber recibido una carta de Basil Ransom esa tarde. Le pidió a Verena que la acompañara a su habitación. La muchacha, al regresar a la calle Diez, no había hecho sino hablar de la música de Wagner, de los cantantes, de la orquesta, de la inmensidad del teatro, del gran placer experimentado. Olive podía darse cuenta del entusiasmo que le producía a Verena Nueva York por hacerle posible disfrutar de aquel tipo de placeres.

—Sí, el señor Burrage ha sido indudablemente muy cortés con nosotras… nadie le podría ganar en lo referente a atenciones —dijo Olive, y se sonrojó ligeramente ante la mirada con que Verena saludó este tributo de estima de la señorita Chancellor a un hombre en particular.

—Me alegra tanto que lo reconozcas, porque me temo que hemos sido un poco rudas con él. —El «hemos» de Verena era angelical—. Estuvo especialmente atento contigo, querida; se ha olvidado de mí. Te miraba con tanta dulzura. ¡Querida Olive, si te casaras con él…! —Y la señorita Tarrant, cuyo estado de ánimo era excelente, abrazó a su compañera para reprimir sus propias tonterías.

—De cualquier manera él quiere que permanezcas un poco con ellos. No han renunciado a eso —comentó Olive, y se dirigió hacia un armario de uno de cuyos

cajones extrajo una carta.

—¿Te lo ha dicho a ti? A mí no me dijo una sola palabra al respecto.

—Esta tarde, cuando volvimos, encontré esta carta de la señora Burrage. Es mejor que la leas. —Y le presentó el documento, abierto, a Verena.

El propósito de aquella nota era comunicar que la señora Burrage no acababa de reconciliarse con la idea de perderse la visita de Verena, con la que tanto habían contado ella y su hijo. Estaba segura de que resultaría tan interesante para la señorita Tarrant como para ellos. Además ella, la señora Burrage, tenía la sensación de no haber oído ni siquiera la mitad de las opiniones de la señorita Tarrant, y había muchos otros que estuvieron presentes el día de la conferencia que habían ido a visitarla esa tarde (sin perder un minuto, como la señorita Chancellor podía ver) para preguntarle de qué modo podían enterarse más sobre aquel tema, cómo podían ponerse en contacto con la brillante expositora para plantearle sus dudas sobre ciertos detalles. Esperaba que aunque las dos jóvenes no pudieran alterar su decisión sobre la visita al menos encontrarían la manera de permanecer en la ciudad un poco más de tiempo para que ella organizara una reunión informal para algunas de aquellas pobres almas sedientas. ¿Podía al menos hablar sobre el tema con la señorita Chancellor? Le comunicaba que ella insistiría sobre la visita. ¿No sería posible que se vieran a la mañana siguiente? ¿Y podía permitirse el grandísimo favor de que la entrevista tuviera lugar en la casa de la señora Burrage? Tenía algo muy personal que decirle, por lo que era aconsejable una gran discreción, y la señorita Chancellor tenía indudablemente que reconocer que eso se podía asegurar mejor bajo el techo de la señora Burrage. Ella le enviaría su carruaje a la hora que la señorita Chancellor considerara pertinente. Pensaba que realmente podría surgir algo muy positivo de aquella conversación.

Verena leyó aquella epístola con gran cuidado; le pareció misteriosa y le confirmó la idea que había recibido la noche anterior, la idea de que no había logrado darle una impresión correcta a aquella curiosa, hábil y mundana mujer el día de su visita a Cambridge, cuando se encontraron en el apartamento de su hijo. Al devolverle la carta a Olive dijo:

—Tal vez por eso él no parecía creer que partimos mañana. Sabe que su madre nos había escrito y piensa que eso nos detendrá.

—Bueno, si te tuviera que decir que es posible, ¿me considerarías intolerablemente voluble?

Verena la miró candorosamente; le pareció tan extraño que Olive pudiera desear ahora quedarse que esa impresión, por el momento, casi cubrió la sensación de placer que le proporcionaba. Pero ese placer afloró un instante después y dijo, con entera seriedad:

—No tienes por qué llevarme de aquí solo por amor a la coherencia. Sería absurdo que pretendiera que no me agrada permanecer en esta ciudad.

—Pienso que tal vez deba verla —dijo Olive con aire de preocupación.

—¡Debe de ser encantador compartir un secreto con la señora Burrage! —exclamó Verena.

—Para ti no será un secreto.

—Querida, no es necesario que me lo digas si no quieres —continuó Verena, que en ese momento pensaba en todo lo que ella no le había comunicado.

—Pensaba que nuestro ideal era compartirlo todo. Por lo visto era solamente el mío.

—Oh, no hables ahora de ideales —exclamó Verena bastante enfurruñada—. Hay en esa carta algo que no está del todo expresado —añadió, mientras Olive parecía estudiar en su cara las razones en pro y en contra de hacerle aquella concesión a la señora Burrage, lo que resultaba bastante embarazoso.

—He estado pensando en esto toda la noche… así que si tú consientes no quedaremos.

—¡Querida, qué espíritu el tuyo! ¡Pensando en eso mientras comíamos aquellos deliciosos platillos, mientras oíamos todo *Lohengrin*! Como yo no he pensado sobre esto, eres tú quien debe decidir. Sabes muy bien que no soy nada difícil.

—¿E irías a quedarte con la señora Burrage, después de todo, si ella me dijera algo que pareciera muy promisorio?

Verena se echó a reír.

—Sabes que esta no es nuestra verdadera vida.

Olive no dijo nada por el momento; luego añadió:

—No creas que me he olvidado de eso. Si sugiero una desviación es solo porque a veces me parece que, después de todo, casi cualquier cosa es mejor a lo que la realidad

puede depararnos. —Estas palabras eran tan oscuras, como melancólico el tono con que fueron pronunciadas, y Verena se sintió aliviada cuando un momento después su compañera comentó—: Pensarás que soy extrañamente incoherente.

Ello le proporcionó a Verena la ocasión para responder con dulzura:

—¡Cómo! No creerás que espere que vivas siempre bajo alguna tensión. Permaneceré una semana en casa de la señora Burrage, o una quincena, o un mes, lo que tú quieras —añadió—; lo que te parezca oportuno fijar con ella después de que hayáis conversado.

—¿Me dejas a mí toda la tarea? No es demasiada la ayuda que me das —dijo Olive.

—¿Para qué necesitas ayuda?

—Para ayudarte a ti.

—Yo no necesito ninguna ayuda. ¡Soy lo suficientemente fuerte! —gritó Verena alegremente. Un instante después preguntó, con una voz entre cómica y conmovida—: Mi querida colega, ¿por qué me haces decir cosas tan presuntuosas?

—Y si te quedas, aunque solo sea mañana, ¿pasarás parte del tiempo con el señor Ransom?

Como Verena parecía por el momento dispuesta a la ironía, habría podido encontrar un nuevo motivo de hilaridad en el tono trémulo e inseguro con que Olive hizo esa pregunta. Pero no fue ese el efecto; ese tono le produjo la primera manifestación de impaciencia, la primera, literalmente, la primera nota de reproche que había surgido en el curso de su notable intimidad. Las mejillas de Verena se encendieron, y sus ojos se humedecieron de repente.

—No sé qué piensas de mí, Olive; ni comprendo por qué no he logrado merecer tu confianza. Desde el principio ha sido lo mismo cada vez que se presenta un caballero. Tal vez entonces tuvieras razón, no voy a negarlo; pero con seguridad las cosas son ahora muy diferentes. No creo que debas sospechar tanto de mí. ¿Por qué me tratas como si tuvieras que vigilarme siempre, como si pretendiera escaparme con cada hombre que se acerca a hablarme? Me parece que te he demostrado cuán poco me importan. Pensaba que para estas fechas ya habrías descubierto que soy una persona seria; que he consagrado mi vida; que hay algo que para mí es indeciblemente querido. Pero tú vuelves a comenzar, una y otra vez… no me haces justicia. He decidido

enfrentarme al futuro sin temores. Pensé que habíamos decidido desarrollar nuestra labor en medio del mundo, afrontando todas las situaciones, continuando en línea recta nuestro sendero, con paso siempre seguro. Y ahora que todo eso parece estar frente a nosotras y que la victoria mueve nuestros estandartes, me resulta extraño que sigas dudando de mí, y que me supongas capaz de abandonar nuestros viejos sueños. El primer día que te vi te dije que era capaz de renunciar, y sabiendo mejor hoy día lo que eso significa, estoy dispuesta a decirlo de nuevo. ¡Puedo y deseo hacerlo! ¡Ah, Olive Chancellor…! —exclamó Verena jadeando durante un momento, por la propia elocuencia y por la impetuosidad de una idea culminante—, ¿no has descubierto todavía que ya he renunciado?

El hábito de hablar en público, el entrenamiento, la práctica, le permitieron a Verena desplegar una serie de proposiciones referentes a sus intereses privados, produciendo un efecto conmovedor y aplastante. Olive era absolutamente consciente de eso, y se dejó conducir, mientras la muchacha pronunciaba una frase tras otra, al mismo estado de atención extática que tenía la costumbre de dedicarle cuando Verena hablaba en la tribuna. Miró a Verena fijamente, sintió que estaba profundamente conmovida, que era exquisitamente apasionada y sincera, que era una doncella inmaculada, temblorosa y devota, que ambas se encontraban a salvo, y que su injusticia e indelicadeza habían sido grandes. Se acercó lentamente a ella, la tomó entre sus brazos y permaneció largo rato abrazada, dándole un beso silencioso. De lo cual Verena dedujo que sus palabras habían sido creídas.

XXXII

La hora que Olive le propuso a la señora Burrage, en una nota enviada muy temprano esa mañana, para la entrevista que había aceptado concederle, fue al mediodía en punto. Había propuesto aquella hora en previsión de muchos otros compromisos. Le hizo saber a la señora Burrage que no deseaba que le enviara el carruaje y recorrió la Quinta Avenida en uno de los ruidosos y repletos autobuses que circulaban por ella. Una de las razones para decidirse por las doce del mediodía había sido su conocimiento de que Basil Ransom se presentaría en el hotel de la calle Diez a las once, y (suponía que no permanecería todo el día) eso le daría la oportunidad de verlo llegar y retirarse. Se había convenido tácitamente entre ellas, la noche anterior, que Verena se sentía lo suficientemente firme en sus principios como para permitirse enfrentar aquella visita y que tal conducta resultaba más digna que evitar el encuentro. Este entendimiento se había transmitido de la una a la otra durante aquel mudo abrazo que ya he descrito y que tuvo lugar antes de que se separaran para ir a dormir. No eran todavía las doce cuando Olive, al salir, lanzó una mirada al amplio vestíbulo soleado donde, esa mañana, con todos los maridos ausentes y todas las esposas y las mujeres solteras dedicadas a arreglar algún asunto en la ciudad, un joven que deseaba mantener un debate con una joven podía disfrutar de todas las ventajas de la sociedad. Basil Ransom estaba aún allí; él y Verena, con todo aquel espacio a su disposición, permanecían de pie en el vano de una ventana, de espalda a la puerta. Como estaban de pie, Olive pensó que él estaba por retirarse, y cerrando la puerta suavemente se detuvo un instante en el corredor, para poder pasar a la parte trasera de la casa en el caso de que oyera sus pasos. Sin embargo, ningún sonido llegó a su oído; era evidente que él se proponía pasar allí el día entero, y que ella lo encontraría a su regreso. Salió del

edificio aún a sabiendas de que la verían por la ventana cuando bajara las escaleras, pero sintiendo que no podía tolerar contemplar la cara de Basil Ransom. Mientras caminaba, con la vista fija hacia delante, en dirección a la Quinta Avenida, por la acera del sol, era apenas consciente de la hermosura del día, del clima perfecto, todo colorido y perfumado por la primavera, que a veces se posa sobre Nueva York cuando se calman los vientos de marzo; se hallaba sumergida en el recuerdo del momento en que ella había permanecido en la ventana (la segunda vez que fue él a visitarla en Boston) y observó a Basil Ransom pasar con Adeline… con Adeline que entonces le pareció capaz de conquistarlo, tarea en la que demostró ser tan ineficaz como en cualquier otra. Revivió la visión que había permitido que danzara delante de sus ojos cuando había visto a aquella pareja cruzar la calle, riendo y conversando, y cómo parecía interponerse frente a los temores que ya entonces —tan extrañamente— la acosaron. Ahora que Adeline había demostrado ser tan infructuosa, y que Verena, por el contrario, se había revelado como una figura magnífica, sentía cierta vergüenza; sentía haberse visto mezclada, aunque fuese marginalmente, en las razones que habían impulsado a la señora Luna a decirle tantas estupideces el día anterior; nada elevado podía surgir de todo aquello. En cuanto a las razones por las que había fracasado su infatigable hermana y que habían hecho que el señor Ransom siguiera su propio camino, Olive Chancellor, por supuesto, prefería no pensar en ellas.

Aunque tenía una gran curiosidad por saber qué tenía que decirle privadamente la señora Burrage, debió esperar algún tiempo para que aquel misterio se aclarara. Durante ese intervalo permaneció sentada en un *boudoir* de notable hermosura, donde había flores y piezas de porcelana y pequeños cuadros de la escuela francesa, y observó a su anfitriona dar vueltas en torno al argumento en círculos cuya vaguedad trataba de disimular. Olive creía que no era el tipo de persona que podía disfrutar pidiendo un favor, especialmente de alguien devoto de las nuevas ideas; y eso era evidentemente lo que estaba ocurriendo. Ya había pedido uno, pero había sido pagado elegantemente; la carta de la señora Burrage que Verena había hallado a su vuelta al hotel de la calle Diez contenía el cheque más cuantioso que la joven hubiera recibido en pago a una conferencia. La petición de que ahora se trataba concernía también a Verena, por supuesto; y Olive no tuvo necesidad de un gran esfuerzo para comprender

que el hecho de que su amiga fuera una joven que recibía dinero no hacía más agradable en aquel momento la tarea de la señora Burrage. La aceptación de dinero (pues aunque lo recibiera Verena en realidad era como si también ella lo recibiera) no le producía a Olive el menor problema; el dinero representaba una fuerza tremenda, y, cuando se quería combatir el mal con cualquier medio, era una felicidad no carecer de aquel instrumento tan necesario para la guerra. Aquella mañana Olive encontraba a la señora Burrage más agradable que la noche anterior. Tenía más que nunca el aire de compartir con ella toda clase de sentimientos y de puntos de vista, y eso no podía sino halagar a Olive, ya que fue la señora Burrage quien se vio precisada a hacer todos los avances, mientras que su huésped escuchaba sentada en silencio. Aquella dama sabía atravesar enormes distancias con unas cuantas palabras de forma suave, inteligente y natural; así, por ejemplo, comentó:

—Muy bien, entonces queda decidido que vendrá y permanecerá aquí hasta que se canse de nosotros.

En realidad nada de eso había quedado decidido, pero Olive ayudó a la señora Burrage más de lo que podía advertir cuando dijo:

—¿Por qué desea usted que le haga esta visita, señora Burrage? ¿Por qué le interesa tanto su trato? ¿No sabe usted que su hijo, hace un año, deseaba casarse con ella?

—Mi querida señorita Chancellor, precisamente de esto deseaba hablarle. Estoy enterada de todo; no creo que se haya encontrado usted con alguien que esté enterada de más cosas que yo. —Y Olive tuvo que creer esto, mientras la señora Burrage, con una sonrisa, erguía su inteligente, orgullosa y triunfal cabeza—. Hace un año tuve conocimiento de que mi hijo estaba enamorado de la señorita Tarrant, sé que lo ha seguido estando desde entonces, y que, por consiguiente, estaría dispuesto a casarse hoy mismo si eso fuera posible. Me atrevería a decir que a usted no le atrae la idea de que ella contraiga matrimonio; eso interrumpiría una amistad que para usted es muy rica en atractivos. —Olive se preguntó por un momento si su anfitriona no iría a decir «muy rica en beneficios»—. Era eso lo que me hacía sentir un poco insegura, pero ya que está dispuesta a hablar del asunto, hablaremos de él.

—No sé qué beneficio vamos a obtener de esta conversación —dijo Olive.

—¿Cómo podremos decirlo si no hacemos la prueba? Nunca desisto de nada hasta no haber estudiado todos los pros y contras.

Fue, desde luego, la señora Burrage quien más contribuyó a mantener la conversación; Olive se limitaba a introducir, de vez en cuando, una pregunta, una protesta, una rectificación, una exclamación teñida de ironía. Pero ninguno de estos recursos tuvo el poder de frenar o de distraer a su anfitriona. Olive advertía cada vez más que ella deseaba serle agradable, atraerla a sus puntos de vista, suavizar las asperezas, colocar la cuestión bajo una nueva luz. Era muy hábil y (Olive se fue convenciendo de ello) totalmente inescrupulosa, pero no la consideraba tan hábil como para ganarle la partida en que se hallaban enfrascadas. Su táctica se reducía, ni más ni menos, a tratar de persuadir a la señorita Chancellor de que tanto ella como su hijo eran acérrimos partidarios del movimiento al que la señorita Chancellor había consagrado su vida. Pero ¿cómo podía creer Olive en algo semejante, cuando comprendía muy bien a qué tipo de personas pertenecía la señora Burrage? Un tipo humano en que la naturaleza misma se había encargado de crear una cara especial dirigida en la dirección opuesta a todo lo que había de serio y de mejor en la vida. Las personas como la señora Burrage vivían y se beneficiaban de los abusos, prejuicios y privilegios, se hallaban inmersas en los crueles y petrificados hábitos del pasado. Debe añadirse, además, que si su anfitriona era una mujer mendaz, Olive no se había encontrado con ninguna que la irritara menos; era lo que se dice una mujer brillante, con genio personal, buen gusto, con un gran cúmulo de perfidia y determinada a destruir al adversario si no lograba convencerlo. Parecía estar a punto de ofrecerle a Olive todos los reinos de este mundo solo con el fin de que contribuyera a provocar determinados sentimientos en Verena Tarrant para que esta aceptara a Henry Burrage.

—Sabemos que es usted quien maneja la situación; que puede hacer de ella lo que le venga en gana. Que podría hacerla decidirse mañana con una sola palabra.

Al principio había dudado, y había hablado de sus dudas, y parecía querer hacer creer que había necesitado echar mano de todo su valor para decirle a Olive así, cara a cara, que Verena dependía enteramente de ella. Pero no parecía sentir el menor temor; solo parecía tratar de expresar una infinita pena por el hecho de que la señorita Chancellor no pudiera entender las inmensas ventajas y beneficios que podría obtener

estableciendo una alianza con la casa de los Burrage. Olive estaba tan impresionada por todo eso, tan ocupada en preguntarse cuáles podían ser aquellos místicos beneficios, y si, después de todo, no constituirían una especie de protección para ambas (de un mal peor), un capital de una clase determinada que ella y Verena pudieran aprovechar a largo plazo, poniendo en su debido sitio a la madre y al hijo cuando aquellos hubieran ofrecido todo lo que podía serles útil, y estaba tan inflamada por la contemplación de aquella vaga visión, en la observación de las manos de la señora Burrage, su solicitud, su valor para mostrarse conciliadora y aduladora fueran cuales fuesen sus motivos y verdaderas pretensiones, que permaneció casi insensible, durante un buen rato, al hecho, ya en sí curioso, de que una mujer de su clase se mostrara tan deseosa de establecer relaciones familiares con los Tarrant. La señora Burrage había explicado este punto diciendo que el estado de su hijo la preocupaba, y que estaba dispuesta a aceptar todo aquello que le pudiera proporcionar alguna felicidad. Lo amaba más que a cualquier otra cosa en el mundo, y se sentía angustiada al verlo aspirar con tanta vehemencia a la mano de la señorita Tarrant sin lograr conquistarla. Hizo responsable a Olive en ese asunto, pero de tal manera que a la vez parecía rendir un tributo a su fuerza de carácter.

—No sé qué relaciones supone usted que tenga con mi amiga —contestó Olive, con cierta altivez—. Ella hará precisamente lo que desee, en los casos a que usted alude. Ella es absolutamente libre; y usted me habla como si yo fuera su guardián.

La señora Burrage explicó entonces que de ninguna manera había querido decir que la señorita Chancellor ejerciera una tiranía de modo consciente; sino solo que Verena tenía por ella una admiración ilimitada, veía a través de sus ojos, aceptaba todas sus opiniones y todas sus preferencias. Estaba segura de que bastaba con que Olive emitiera una opinión favorable sobre su hijo para que la señorita Tarrant la aceptara inmediatamente como propia.

—También es verdad —añadió la señora Burrage, sonriendo— que me podría usted preguntar por qué razón debía dar una opinión favorable sobre un joven que desea casarse precisamente con aquella persona que más que ninguna otra en el mundo usted desea que permanezca soltera.

Esta descripción de Verena era, por supuesto, absolutamente correcta; pero no le resultó agradable a Olive que aquel hecho hubiera sido percibido con tanta claridad, ni aunque fuera por una persona que lo expresaba con el aire de que no había nada en el mundo que ella no pudiera comprender.

—¿Sabía su hijo que iba usted a hablarme de esto? —preguntó Olive con bastante frialdad, dejando a un lado el asunto de su influencia sobre Verena y sus deseos de que permaneciera soltera.

—Oh, sí, pobre muchacho; ayer tuvimos una larga conversación, y le dije que haría todo lo que estuviera en mis manos para ayudarlo. ¿Se acuerda usted de mi breve visita a Cambridge la primavera pasada, cuando nos conocimos en el apartamento de Henry? Entonces comencé a percibir qué aire estaba soplando; pero ayer tuvimos un verdadero *éclaircissement*. Al principio no me gustó el asunto; no me importa decírselo a usted, ahora… ahora también yo estoy muy entusiasmada. Cuando una joven tiene el encanto y es tan original como la señorita Tarrant, no importa absolutamente quién pueda ser; ella misma crea las reglas por las cuales va a ser juzgada; ella crea su propia situación social. ¡Además la señorita Tarrant tiene tal futuro…! —añadió rápidamente la señora Burrage, como si se tratara de un hecho que no había que olvidar de ningún modo—. Todo el problema ha vuelto a surgir; el sentimiento que Henry deseaba considerar ya muerto, o al menos muriéndose, ha revivido, a través del… difícilmente sabría cómo llamarlo con propiedad, pero puedo en verdad decir que a través del inesperadamente gran efecto que logró la aparición de Verena aquí. El miércoles por la noche estuvo realmente magnífica; todos los prejuicios, convencionalismos e incomprensiones que hubiesen podido existir hacia ella cayeron por los suelos. Yo esperaba un éxito, pero no de las dimensiones del que ustedes obtuvieron —continuó la señora Burrage, sonriendo, mientras Olive reflexionaba en aquel «ustedes»—. En pocas palabras, mi pobre hijo ha vuelto a sufrir el despertar de la llama; y ahora puedo darme cuenta de que nunca se interesará por ninguna otra joven de la misma manera que por esta. Mi querida señorita Chancellor, *j'en ai pris mon parti*, y tal vez usted conoce ya mi manera de actuar. No soy una persona que se resigne fácilmente, soy por el contrario excelente para lograr lo que me propongo. No he renunciado, solo he cambiado de partido. Sea en favor o en contra debo tomar partido. ¿Conoce a gente de este carácter?

Henry ha dejado el asunto en mis manos, y usted ve que ahora lo deposito en las suyas. Ayúdeme. Trabajemos juntas.

Para tratarse de la señora Burrage aquel fue un discurso muy largo; ella estaba acostumbrada a resolver sus problemas de un modo rápido y alusivo. Y tenía todas las razones para esperar que la señorita Chancellor advirtiera la importancia del problema. Lo que Olive hizo, en cambio, fue preguntarle sencillamente:

—¿Por qué nos hizo usted venir a esta ciudad?

La señora Burrage dudó en ese punto, pero fue solo por veinte segundos.

—Sencillamente porque estamos interesados en la labor que ustedes realizan.

—Eso me sorprende —dijo Olive, dubitativamente.

—Me atrevería a decir que no me cree usted, pero tal juicio es superficial. Estoy segura de que la mejor prueba es esta oferta que le he hecho —comentó la señora Burrage con brío—. Hay muchas jóvenes, que carecen de bases ideológicas, y que estarían felices de poder casarse con mi hijo. Es muy interesante y posee una gran fortuna. Añada a eso que también es un ángel.

Eso era realmente cierto, y Olive sintió con mayor intensidad que la actitud de aquellas personas afortunadas, que consideraban el mundo perfecto tal como es, era muy curiosa. Pero mientras permanecía sentada allí se le ocurrió que el espíritu humano está sujeto a muchas modificaciones, que el influjo de la verdad es grande, y que en la vida existen algunas sorpresas felices que compensan las desagradables. Nada podía obligar a aquella gente a dirigir su afecto hacia la hija de un «curandero»; hubiera sido absurdo pensar que trataban de sustraer a aquella joven de su medio familiar solo para frustrarla. Es más, el observar a su joven anfitrión en Delmonico's y en el amplio palco de la Academia de Música, donde habían contado con el espacio y la soledad necesarios para poder murmurar algunas palabras sin que los vecinos tuvieran que volver la cabeza, al observar, digo, los modales de Henry Burrage, se convenció de que el año anterior se había formado un juicio precipitado, que estaba tan enamorado como las pasiones raquíticas de la época se lo permitían (pues aunque la señorita Chancellor tenía fe en la progresiva mejoría del género humano, le parecía que había demasiada agua mezclada en la sangre de todos nosotros), que él apreciaba todo lo que había de excepcional en Verena, que era su genio, su don, y por consiguiente estaría interesado

en promoverla, y que él era de una pasta tan buena que su mujer podría manejarlo tan fácilmente como se le antojara. Por supuesto había que contar con la suegra; pero a menos que estuviera mintiendo descaradamente, la señora Burrage parecía tener la intención de proyectarse en el nuevo ambiente, o al menos apoyarlo con generosidad; así que, por extraño que pudiera parecer, el temor que más se presentaba a la mente de Olive no era el de que aquella poderosa y comunicativa matrona, ligeramente irritable con la inteligencia y, sin embargo, amable con la prosperidad, fuera a combatir a la novia de su hijo, sino por el contrario que llegara a sentirse demasiado atraída por ella. Era un temor que podía ser descrito como un presentimiento de celos. La rápida mente de la señorita Chancellor llegó a captar que posiblemente la propuesta que le había sido hecha en condiciones tan complejas e insólitas era simplemente una oportunidad magnífica, una posición aún mejor de lo que ella habría podido soñar para Verena. Implicaba una enorme suma de dinero, mucho mayor que la suya, y la asociación de un par de personas inteligentes que simulaban muy bien sus convicciones, fueran reales o no, y que tenían un centenar de ramificaciones en el gran mundo, y una especie de pedestal social sobre el que Verena realmente podría lanzar sus rayos luminosos a grandes distancias. Tal vez esa conciencia de que he hablado comenzó a debilitarse ante el pensamiento de tener que tomar en consideración un problema de tal magnitud y pasar por una verdadera prueba de fuego. Ante aquellas circunstancias la pobre joven se sintió de verdad triste y desamparada; solo pudo preguntarse vagamente si en nombre del deber se veía obligada a darle la mano a las torturas de su propio espíritu.

—Y si ella se casara con él, ¿quién podría asegurarme que después usted se interesaría aún de los problemas que ocupan todos nuestros pensamientos, los suyos y los míos? —Esta pregunta fue el resultado de la rápida meditación de Olive; pero aun a ella sus palabras le resultaron demasiado ásperas.

La señora Burrage recibió aquella pregunta de un modo admirable.

—¿Duda usted que nosotros estemos fingiendo un interés que no tenemos, solo para conquistarla? No es muy agradable de su parte ese pensamiento, señorita Chancellor. Pero por supuesto usted tiene derecho a ser extremadamente cautelosa. Puedo asegurarle que mi hijo cree firmemente que el movimiento de ustedes es el gran problema del futuro inmediato, y que ha entrado en una nueva fase; ¿cómo la llama?,

bueno, en el dominio de la política práctica. En lo que a mí personalmente me concierne, no crea usted que yo no deseo todo lo que nosotras, las pobres mujeres, podamos obtener, o que rechazaría ningún privilegio ni ventaja que se me ofrezca. No me apasiono demasiado por nada, pero tengo, como ya le he dicho, mi propio modo tranquilo de actuar en pro de algo. Si todos los adeptos a su movimiento no son peores que yo, puede considerarse satisfecha. Mi hijo me ha hablado largamente sobre las ideas de ustedes; y aunque solo las compartiera porque él lo hace, haría algo provechoso. Me podría usted decir que no puede concebir a Henry al lado de una esposa que pronunciara discursos públicos, pero yo estoy firmemente convencida de que muchas cosas están a punto de cambiar, y que será muy pronto. Henry es un caballero de pies a cabeza y no existe una situación en que no sepa comportarse con tacto.

Olive pudo darse cuenta de que realmente querían muchísimo a Verena, inmensamente, y le era imposible creer que no la fueran a tratar bien. Es más, pensaba que tal vez podían ser demasiado indulgentes, que pudieran mimarla demasiado, viciarla; ella era perfectamente consciente de que la personalidad de Verena era susceptible de deteriorarse y de que su trato había sido hasta el momento extraordinariamente severo. Tenía centenares de objeciones, protestas y respuestas que aducir; lo único que la incomodaba era no saber por dónde empezar.

—Me imagino que no ha visto usted nunca al doctor Tarrant y a su esposa —observó con una calma que consideró bastante eficiente.

—¿Quiere usted decir que son del todo indeseables? Mi hijo me ha dicho que son personas imposibles de tratar y estoy preparada. ¿Le interesa saber cómo vamos a regular el trato con ellos? Querida señorita Chancellor, nos arreglaremos con ellos de la misma manera en que lo ha hecho usted.

Si Olive podía dar respuestas desconcertantes también podía hacerlo la señora Burrage. También tuvo otra respuesta memorable cuando la visitante, no aceptando la suposición de que estuviera en su poder disponer del destino de Verena, declaró que no comprendía por qué razón la señora Burrage se había dirigido a ella, que la señorita Tarrant era tan libre como el aire, que su futuro estaba en sus propias manos, que en un caso como aquel a nadie podía ocurrírsele intervenir.

—Mi querida señorita Chancellor, no le estamos pidiendo que intervenga; lo único que le pedimos es que deje de intervenir.

—¿Y me ha hecho venir solo para esto?

—Para esto y para lo que ya le insinuaba en mi carta, que sea usted tan amable de ejercer su influencia sobre la señorita Tarrant para persuadirla a que se quede con nosotros una semana o dos. Este es en realidad, después de todo, el gran favor que le pido. Préstenosla por algún tiempo y nosotros nos encargaremos de lo demás. Puede sonarle presuntuoso que lo diga, pero estoy segura de que pasará aquí momentos agradables.

—No vive para eso —dijo Olive.

—Lo que quiero decir es que aquí tendrá la ocasión de pronunciar una conferencia cada noche —respondió la señora Burrage con una sonrisa.

—Me parece que quiere usted probarla demasiado. ¿Cree usted en realidad, aunque haya afirmado lo contrario, que yo ejerzo un control sobre sus acciones, y, en los límites de lo posible, también sobre sus deseos, y que sienta celos de cualquier otra relación que ella pueda tener? Puedo imaginarme que tal vez demos esa impresión, pero eso solo demostraría qué poco es comprendida una amistad como la nuestra, y qué superficial es todavía —Olive sintió que aquel «todavía» tenía una resonancia verdaderamente histórica— la interpretación de muchos de los elementos de la actividad de las mujeres, y cuán necesario resulta educar la opinión pública. Y al pensar usted sobre mi actitud lo que imagino —continuó la señorita Chancellor—, me siento realmente sorprendida de que no advierta lo poco que me interesa abandonar a mi… a mi víctima en sus brazos.

Si en este momento nos fuera concedido examinar de una sola ojeada el interior de la mente de la señora Burrage (una libertad que hasta el momento no nos hemos tomado) me temo que la encontraríamos considerablemente exasperada ante el tono de superioridad de su invitada, y por haber recibido, de labios de aquella joven seca, obstinada y provinciana, el calificativo de superficial. Si Verena le gustaba en la medida en que trataba de convencer a la señorita Chancellor, también era consciente de no poder tolerar a la señorita Chancellor mucho más de lo que probablemente le hubiera podido confesar a Verena. Parte de aquella exasperación se manifestó

seguramente cuando dijo, después de darse una buena llamada de atención para no decir demasiado:

—También yo pienso que sería absurdo de nuestra parte presumir que la señorita Tarrant encontraría a mi hijo irresistible, especialmente después de haberlo rechazado. Pero, aunque ella persista en esa actitud, ¿se considera usted lo suficientemente segura en relación con otros pretendientes?

La manera en que la señorita Chancellor saltó de la silla al oír esas palabras le demostró a su anfitriona que si había pretendido tomarse una pequeña venganza espantándola, el experimento había tenido un gran éxito.

—¿A qué otros se refiere usted? —preguntó Olive, irguiendo la espalda y mirando hacia abajo como desde una gran altura.

La señora Burrage —y desde el momento en que nos hemos permitido entrar en su mente podemos continuar el proceso— no había querido referirse a nadie en particular, pero una serie de asociaciones se encadenaron en su memoria ante el llamear rencoroso de la joven. Se acordó de un caballero que se le había acercado en la sala de música, después del discurso de la señorita Tarrant, mientras ella hablaba con Olive y a quien la joven había saludado con excesiva frialdad.

—No me refiero a nadie en especial; pero, por ejemplo, hay un joven a quien me pidió que invitara y que me pareció un posible admirador. —Al decir esto la señora Burrage se levantó, y permaneció de pie un instante al lado de su huésped—. ¿No cree usted que es una pretensión demasiado grande esperar que una joven, bella, atractiva, inteligente y encantadora como ella, permanezca siempre bajo la tutela de usted, excluida de otros afectos, segregada de un aspecto importante de la vida, defendida contra los peligros, si es que usted los considera peligros, a que está expuesta toda joven que no sea del todo repugnante? Querida señorita, ¿me podré permitir arriesgar un consejo? —La señora Burrage no esperó a tener el consentimiento de Olive y continuó sin interrumpirse, con el aire de saber exactamente qué era lo que tenía que decir y sintiendo a la vez que, aunque fuera un consejo valioso, no era necesario preocuparse demasiado en el modo de exponerlo, no más, por ejemplo, que sobre las demás cosas de este mundo—. No intente lo imposible. Está usted en posesión de algo muy hermoso; pero no vaya usted a arruinar esa posesión tratando de ir demasiado

lejos. Si no se aprovecha usted de lo mejor tendrá que conformarse tal vez con lo peor; si es seguridad lo que usted busca tal vez ella se encuentre más segura con mi hijo, a pesar de que usted nos considera lo peor, que como una posible presa de aventureros, o explotadores o gente que una vez que se apodere de ella, la harán callar para siempre.

Olive bajó la mirada; no podía soportar aquella horrible expresión de la cara de la señora Burrage, quien se creía haber apuntado muy cerca del blanco, ni podía soportar su expresión de habilidad mundana, o de confianza nacida de la mucha experiencia. Sentía que nada le sería ahorrado, que debía tocar fondo, que también debía resistir a esa prueba, y que, en particular, había una sabiduría detestable en los consejos de la anfitriona. Sin embargo, también era consciente de que no tenía ninguna obligación de quedarle reconocida; deseaba marcharse, aunque tuviera que llevar adheridas las palabras de la señora Burrage, escapar a algún lugar donde pudiera estar sola y pensar.

—No sé por qué razón ha pensado usted que tenía el derecho de llamarme para decirme esto. No tengo ningún interés en su hijo… en sus asuntos privados. —Y se abrigó más aún en su capa, intentando retirarse.

—Ha sido extraordinariamente bondadoso de su parte haber venido —dijo la señora Burrage, imperturbablemente—. Piense en todo lo que le he dicho, estoy segura de que no habrá perdido el tiempo.

—¡Tengo ya demasiadas cosas en que pensar! —exclamó Olive, insinceramente; aunque sabía perfectamente que las ideas de la señora Burrage la perseguirían.

—Y dígale que si ella desea hacernos esa pequeña visita, todo Nueva York se inclinará a sus pies.

Eso era precisamente lo que Olive quería, y sin embargo le pareció una mofa oírselo decir a la señora Burrage. La señorita Chancellor se retiró sin dar ninguna respuesta, ni siquiera cuando la otra le dijo nuevamente que se sentía muy agradecida por su visita. Cuando llegó a la calle advirtió que se encontraba violentamente agitada, pero de ninguna manera desfalleciente; caminaba deprisa, excitada y consternada, sintiendo que su insoportable conciencia la mordía como un animal furioso, que Verena había recibido una magnífica oferta y que no le era posible, de ninguna manera, persuadirse de que debía guardar silencio. Por supuesto, si Verena se sentía tentada a aceptar los ofrecimientos de los Burrage, el peligro de que Basil Ransom se apoderara de ella

dejaba de existir. Esos eran los pensamientos que revoloteaban en la mente de Olive mientras caminaba por la calle y la ponían nerviosa, consciente solo de ese problema que había vuelto gris aquel día radiante, sin observar a las personas sofisticadas que pasaban a su lado por la amplia acera de la Quinta Avenida. La idea se le había presentado el día anterior, inspirada precisamente por la carta de la señora Burrage; y, luego, como sabemos, había formulado vagamente el concepto preguntándole a Verena si estaba dispuesta a hacer aquella visita si los Burrage insistían. Y habían insistido, de eso no quedaba ninguna duda, y los términos en que se había planteado el problema eran tan tajantes que resultaban crueles. Había pensado que si Verena daba la impresión de ceder a la insistencia de los Burrage, Basil Ransom se sentiría desalentado, pues pensaría que, mal vestido y pobre, no tenía ninguna posibilidad de competir con personas que disponían de todos los favores de la fortuna y la posición social. De cualquier modo, Olive no concebía que él renunciara a su propósito con tanta facilidad; ella no creía que el joven tuviera un carácter pusilánime. De cualquier manera era una buena oportunidad que podía serle de ayuda, una vez que la examinara con mayor detenimiento. Por el momento veía que no se trataba de que Verena fuera prestada por unos días sino que era un regalo, una dádiva expresada en términos extraordinariamente generosos. Hubiera sido imposible utilizar a los Burrage como un cobijo fiándose de la pretensión de que ellos no eran peligrosos; ellos se habían vuelto peligrosos desde el momento en que se habían convertido en partidarios de sus ideas y le podían ofrecer a la muchacha posibilidades ilimitadas. Olive se repitió una y otra vez que aquella conversión no encubría sino una enorme falsedad; pero también era posible que Verena no pensara lo mismo y que confiara enteramente en ellos. Cuando Olive Chancellor tenía dos alternativas para elegir, y tenía un problema que resolver, se entregaba apasionadamente a él hasta llegar a una resolución; sentía, por encima de todo, que debía resolver aquel problema inmediatamente, antes de que ocurriera cualquier otra cosa. Le parecía que no le era posible entrar en el hotel de la calle Diez sin haber decidido primero si podía confiar en los Burrage o no. Al decir «confiar» quería dar a entender que fracasaran en su intento de conquistar a Verena y a la vez excluyeran a Basil Ransom. Olive parecía inclinarse a pensar que él probablemente no tendría la sangre fría de seguirla al interior de aquellos salones dorados, los cuales, después de

todo, le serían cerrados tan pronto como la madre y el hijo descubrieran sus intenciones. También llegó a preguntarse si Verena no estaría mejor defendida contra el joven sureño en Nueva York, en medio de aquellas complicaciones protocolarias, que en Boston, en casa de la prima del enemigo. Continuó caminando por la Quinta Avenida sin hacer caso a las calles transversales, y solo después de un buen rato advirtió que estaba cerca de Washington Square. Ya en ese momento había concluido definitivamente que ni Basil Ransom ni Henry Burrage podrían conquistar a la señorita Tarrant, que por consiguiente no se trataba de dos peligros juntos, sino de uno solo; que eso significaba ya una buena ganancia, y que, por lo mismo, debía considerar atentamente cuál de ambos peligros era mayor, para dedicarle todos sus esfuerzos. Continuó caminando hacia la plaza, que, como todos saben, es muy amplia y se abre sobre las calles vecinas. Los árboles y los macizos de flores habían comenzado a cubrirse de botones y retoños, las fuentes brillaban bajo los rayos del sol, los niños del barrio, tanto los pobres del lado sur, que se entretenían con juegos que requerían muchos trazos de tiza sobre el pavimento y se tiraban en el suelo e interrumpían el paso de los peatones, como el grupo de niños con cabello rizado y sombreros de plumas que jugaban con sus aros bajo las miradas de las niñeras francesas, toda la población infantil llenaba el aire primaveral de sonidos que tenían un timbre tierno y rudo a la vez, como las hojas y el suave césped. Olive deambuló un poco por el lugar, y terminó por sentarse en una de las bancas largas. Hacía mucho tiempo que no actuaba de una manera tan vaga, tan inútil. Había una docena de cosas que tenía que hacer mientras permaneciera en Nueva York; pero se olvidó de ellas, o si las recordó tuvo la impresión de que en aquel momento carecían de toda importancia. Permaneció sentada durante cerca de una hora, pensativa, trémula, canalizando una y otra vez ciertos pensamientos. Le parecía que estaba frente a una crisis de su destino, y que no podía eximirse de examinarla bajo una luz justa. Antes de levantarse para volver a la calle Diez ya había resuelto que ninguna amenaza era tan grande como la que constituía Basil Ransom; mentalmente había aceptado cualquier arreglo que pudiera alejar tal sombra de su vida. Si los Burrage conquistaban a Verena, la sustraerían de Olive inconmensurablemente menos de lo que Ransom sería capaz. Era a él, a él a quien debían sustraerla. Volvió al hotel y el sirviente que la recibió le dijo, en respuesta a su

pregunta, que la señorita Tarrant había salido con el caballero que se había presentado por la mañana y que aún no había vuelto. Olive se quedó petrificada. El reloj del vestíbulo marcaba las tres de la tarde.

XXXIII

—Salga conmigo, señorita Tarrant; salga conmigo. Venga a dar un paseo conmigo.

Esas eran las palabras que decía Basil Ransom cuando Olive los vio, en el vano de la ventana. Por supuesto antes había habido una conversación que había dado lugar a tal petición; por el tono, más que por las palabras, era posible advertir un grado de intimidad notablemente desarrollado. Verena percibió ese tono cuando él habló y se espantó un poco, se sintió incómoda. Fue una de las razones por las que se levantó de su silla y se dirigió a la ventana… un movimiento un tanto incoherente, pues con él pretendía hacerle comprender que era imposible que aceptara su invitación. Para aquel fin hubiera valido mucho más que permaneciera sentada con mucha firmeza en su silla. Él la hizo sentir nerviosa e intranquila, había comenzado a percibir que él le producía un efecto extraño. Era cierto que había salido con él la primera vez que fue a visitarla; pero le parecía que existía una diferencia importante debido al hecho de que entonces fue ella quien propuso el paseo… sencillamente porque era lo más fácil de hacer cuando alguien se presentaba en la casa de Monadnoc Place.

Aquella vez habían salido porque ella lo había sugerido, no él. Y además, no era lo mismo salir a pasear por Cambridge, donde ella conocía cada paso que daba y tenía la confianza y la libertad que le producía estar en su propio terreno, y el pretexto, del todo natural, de quererle mostrar las facultades, que ir a vagabundear por las calles de esta enorme y extraña ciudad, que, aunque atractiva y deliciosa como era, no le proporcionaba la excusa de ser la morada de él, no la verdadera al menos. Ransom quería mostrarle algunas cosas; quería mostrarle todo; pero Olive no estaba segura, después de una hora de conversación, de desear especialmente ver algo más de lo que él era capaz de mostrarle. Ya le había mostrado muchísimas cosas mientras había

estado sentado junto a ella, especialmente lo despreciable que le parecía la idea de que las mujeres fueran iguales a los hombres. Parecía haber ido a visitarla solo para eso, pues durante todo el tiempo no había hecho sino insistir en el tema; ella no podía hablar de nada sin que él volviera a caer en lo mismo. No expresaba sus ideas claramente, por el contrario, era tremendamente insinuante y satírico, y pretendía haber pulverizado todos los argumentos que ella había expuesto, y muchos otros más que podría exponer; pero su exageración, y la manera en que modificaba dos o tres de las afirmaciones que Olive había sostenido en casa de la señora Burrage, indicaban que era el bromista más descarado. No sabía hacer más que reírse; parecía dar por sentado que podía pasar riéndose todo el día sin que ella se llegara a ofender. Bueno, que lo hiciera si eso le divertía; pero ella no comprendía por qué debía pasear con él por Nueva York para darle esa oportunidad.

Verena le había dicho a Ransom, y también se lo había dicho a Olive, que estaba decidida a producir algún efecto sobre él; pero de repente tuvo una sensación diferente al respecto… dejó de preocuparle el que pudiera producir o no algún efecto. No veía por qué ella debía tomarlo tan en serio cuando él no la tomaba en serio; es decir, a sus ideas. Antes había creído que él no deseaba discutirlas. Eso se le había ocurrido cuando él le dijo en Cambridge que su interés por ella era puramente personal, no polémico. Entonces había creído que se trataba sencillamente de un joven del Sur con curiosidad por saber cómo era una brillante joven de Nueva Inglaterra; pero después le había parecido un poco más claro, y su breve conversación con Ransom en casa de la señora Burrage arrojó cierta luz sobre el problema, y le pareció entender en qué consistía la curiosidad de un joven sureño. ¿También él quería hacerle la corte? Esa suposición la irritó de antemano. Lo que menos deseaba en el mundo era tener nuevos conflictos con Olive, ya que esta le había hecho pensar (no solo durante la escena de la noche anterior, que, después de todo, no había sido sino una simple repetición, sino durante todo el tiempo, desde el principio mismo de su amistad) que realmente despertaba un interés ajeno a sus dotes oratorias. Si el día anterior le había agradado la idea de combatir con el señor Ransom y refutar sus puntos de vista hasta convencerlo, aquella mañana había entrado en el salón con la idea de que, ahora que estaban reunidos en un lugar tranquilo y favorable a la conversación, él podría aludir a los

distintos temas de su disertación uno por uno, como muchos otros caballeros habían hecho al escucharla en anteriores ocasiones. Nada le gustaba tanto como eso, y Olive no podría hacer ninguna objeción. Pero Ransom no había discutido, simplemente se había reído y burlado de ella, y había expuesto una serie de extrañas fantasías sobre la deliciosa manera en que las mujeres lograrían arreglar el mundo cuando, como ella había señalado en su discurso, se liberaran de los muros que las aprisionaban. Continuó hablando sobre aquellos muros; parecía no querer abandonar aquel símil. Dijo que había ido a contemplarla a través de los muros de cristal y que, si no fuera por temor a herirla, se hubiera atrevido a romperlos. Estaba determinado a encontrar la llave para abrir su prisión, aunque tuviera que buscarla por todo el mundo; era un tormento poder hablar con ella solo por el hueco de la cerradura. Si no podía ocuparse de ese tema, al menos podía ocuparse de ella, tenderle la mano mientras le fuera posible. Verena, desde el día que había ido por primera vez a visitar a Olive Chancellor, no había sentido una sensación igual; era como si la arrancaran de la tierra y la transportaran por el aire.

—Es un día encantador y me gustaría mucho poder mostrarle Nueva York, de la misma manera que usted me mostró las bellezas de Harvard —continuó Basil Ransom, insistiendo para que Olive accediera a su solicitud—. Aquella vez me dijo usted que era lo único que podía hacer por mí, y yo ahora es lo único que puedo hacer por usted. Me resultaría odioso que se marchara sin haber tenido más que esta seca conversación en el vestíbulo de una pensión.

—Muchas gracias por calificarla de seca —exclamó Verena, riéndose, mientras en ese momento Olive salía del edificio y descendía los escalones bajo su mirada.

—Mi pobre prima sí que es seca; sería incapaz de mover un solo cabello de la cabeza para mirarnos —dijo el joven.

La figura de Olive, al pasar, adquirió los ojos de Verena una expresión extraña, conmovedora y trágica, un compendio de muchísimas cosas, familiares y extrañas a la vez; y la acompañante de Basil Ransom se dijo a sí misma qué poco sabían los hombres sobre las mujeres, o, al menos, sobre lo que realmente era delicado, ya que hasta él, sin ninguna intención cruel, podía considerar ridícula aquella encarnación de lo patético, y expresar sus opiniones con palabras rudas y burlonas. Ransom, a decir verdad, no

estaba dispuesto a ser demasiado escrupuloso ese día, y lo único que deseaba era desembarazarse de Olive Chancellor, cuya imagen, a fin de cuentas, decididamente lo fastidiaba y lo aburría. Estaba feliz de ver que se alejaba; pero eso no era suficiente, podía volver demasiado pronto, aquel lugar estaba lleno de ella, era una expresión suya. Y ese día quería apoderarse de Verena, llevarla lejos, reproducir un poco las felices circunstancias de que habían disfrutado el día de la visita a Cambridge. Y el hecho de que aquello, tal como estaban programadas las cosas, pudiera tener lugar solo ese día, excitaba aún más su deseo. Había meditado largamente sobre aquella cuestión en las últimas cuarenta y ocho horas, y estaba convencido de que veía las cosas en su exacta realidad. Estaba mucho más interesado en Verena de lo que había estado por nadie en su vida, pero se había propuesto que aquella verdad no creara ninguna diferencia en sus relaciones. Era eso precisamente lo que le daba tan alto valor a aquella ocasión única que tenía ante sí. Era demasiado vergonzosamente pobre, su situación era demasiado precaria como para tener el derecho de proponerle matrimonio a una joven en la posición especial de Verena. Podía darse cuenta de cuán envidiable era aquella posición; el discurso en casa de la señora Burrage se lo había demostrado de una manera muy definida, le había enseñado cuáles eran las posibilidades de la joven, le había mostrado que el público asistiría en multitudes para disfrutar de un espectáculo tan colmado de atractivos (y no se le podía culpar), que ella fácilmente podía llegar a hacer una gran carrera, como la de una actriz o una cantante distinguida, y que podría ganar fortunas solo ligeramente menores a las que aquellas damas podían obtener. ¿Quién no hubiera pagado medio dólar por una hora semejante a la que él había pasado en casa de la señora Burrage? La clase de cosas que ella era capaz de hacer, de decir, era un artículo para el que habría cada vez más demanda… una palabrería fluida, agradable, de tercera clase, una perfecta charlatanería, fuese consciente o inconscientemente expresada; el público estúpido, gregario, ingenuo, la democracia iluminada de su país natal, podían engullir una cantidad sin límites de aquel alimento. Estaba seguro de que Verena podía continuar por aquel camino durante varios años, con su retrato expuesto en los aparadores de las farmacias y los carteles con sus programas pegados en las paredes, y durante ese tiempo podría acumular una fortuna suficiente como para mantenerla en la opulencia toda la vida. Tal vez expongo a nuestro

joven al desprecio de las mentes superiores si digo que todo eso le parecía un impedimento serio para continuar interesado en Verena. Sus escrúpulos nacían sin duda alguna de un falso orgullo, un sentimiento en el que se distinguía la trama de un tejido moral sin consistencia, como el que aparecía en su concepción sureña de la caballerosidad; pero se sentía avergonzado de su pobreza, de la absoluta mediocridad de su situación, cuando pensaba en la nube dorada que rodeaba a la protegida de la señora Burrage. Y sentía esa vergüenza aun cuando fuera consciente de lo mezquino que resultaba aprovecharse de la imbecilidad humana, y de que era mejor permanecer en la miseria y la oscuridad, sin fe ni siquiera en uno mismo. Había nacido en un medio afortunado, y a pesar de los años de miseria que siguieron a la guerra no se había librado de la creencia de que un hombre que deseara casarse con una joven encantadora no le podía proponer que fuera a vivir con él en condiciones miserables. Por otra parte tampoco era posible pensar en un matrimonio mientras Verena continuara beneficiándose con el ejercicio de su bien remunerada profesión; si él llegara a convertirse en su esposo debía encontrar la manera de mantenerla en silencio. En medio de todo esto un deseo irrefrenable lo llevaba a probar, por una vez, intensamente, todo aquello que estaba condenado a perder o, por lo menos, lo que le estaba vedado obtener. Pasar un día entero con ella y no volver a verla nunca más… tal idea se presentó a su mente como el mínimo y el máximo de sus posibilidades. Ni siquiera tuvo necesidad de recordar que el joven señor Burrage era capaz de ofrecerle todo aquello de que él carecía, incluyendo la más entusiasta adhesión a sus ideas.

—Será muy agradable ir hoy al parque. ¿Por qué no da usted un paseo conmigo, como lo hice yo con usted en el pequeño parque de Harvard? —le preguntó una vez que Olive hubo desaparecido.

—Oh, ya lo conozco muy bien, he visto hasta el último rincón. Un amigo mío me invitó amablemente a pasear en su coche ayer —respondió Verena.

—¿Un amigo? ¿El señor Burrage, quiere usted decir? —Y Ransom se la quedó mirando con sus ojos extraordinariamente hermosos—. Por supuesto, yo no dispongo de un vehículo para poder llevarla, pero nos podemos sentar a conversar en un banco. —Ella no confirmó que fuera el señor Burrage pero se sintió incapaz de negarlo, y algo en su cara le hizo saber a Ransom que había acertado. De modo que continuó—: ¿Es que

solo puede salir con él? Es posible que a él no le agrade, pero ¿no puede usted hacer sino lo que a él le agrada? La señora Luna me dijo que él deseaba casarse con usted y he visto en la casa de su madre las atenciones que tuvo con usted. Si va a casarse con él podrá salir a pasear a su lado todos los días del año, y esa es precisamente la razón por la que me debería de conceder hoy una hora o dos antes de que eso resulte imposible. —Hablaba sin pensar demasiado en lo que decía, se había propuesto no tomar nada demasiado en serio ese día, y en realidad lo único que le importaba era convencerla de salir a pasear. Pero vio que sus palabras la habían hecho ruborizar; ella lo contemplaba estupefacta ante las libertades que se tomaba y la familiaridad con que la trataba; él continuó eliminando cualquier dureza e ironía de sus palabras—: Sé que no me corresponde inmiscuirme en sus asuntos matrimoniales ni preguntar con quién sale a pasear en coche, le pido que me disculpe si le he parecido indiscreto e inoportuno, pero daría cualquier cosa por liberarla un poco de sus ataduras, de sus compromisos, y sentir durante una o dos horas como si… como si… —E hizo una pausa.

—¿Como si qué? —preguntó ella muy seriamente.

—Como si no existiera ningún señor Burrage… ninguna señorita Chancellor, en estos lugares. —No era precisamente eso lo que había querido decir.

—No sé qué quiere usted decir, ni por qué habla de otras personas. Yo puedo hacer perfectamente lo que quiera. ¡Pero no comprendo cómo puede usted dar por hecho lo que solo pudiera ocurrir!

Verena no dijo estas palabras con coquetería, ni para hacer que él insistiera más en su petición, sino porque estaba pensando y quería ganar un poco de tiempo. La alusión a Henry Burrage la había conmovido, así como el que Ransom pudiera pensar que había estado en el parque en circunstancias más agradables de las que él proponía. No lo habían sido y, de algún modo, quería que él lo supiera. Pasear por aquellos lugares en compañía de alguien, detenerse aquí y allá, a tomar un respiro, mirar los animales como había visto que la gente hacía el día anterior, sentarse en algún sitio un poco apartado en el cual se pudieran ver los hermosos panoramas que había contemplado desde lo alto de la calesa al lado de Henry Burrage… había tenido que ver todo desde la altura y eso la había hecho sentirse indebidamente superior; lo que proponía Basil Ramson se adecuaba mucho más a sus gustos, mucho más a su idea de auténtica

diversión. Pensó también que el señor Ransom debía de haber abandonado sus labores para ir a visitarla a esa hora; las personas como él pasaban siempre las mañanas ganándose la vida, y era solo al señor Burrage a quien eso no le preocupaba, ya que carecía de profesión. El señor Ransom quería sacrificarle todo el día. Eso la impresionaba; era la muchacha más bondadosa del mundo, demasiado considerada para no ser sensible a cualquier sacrificio que se hiciera por ella. Siempre había hecho todo lo que la gente le pedía. Además, si Olive establecía aquel extraño arreglo para que ella permaneciera algún tiempo con la señora Burrage, Ransom lo consideraría como una prueba de que había algo serio entre ella y el dueño de la casa, a despecho de todo lo que pudiera aducir en contra; es más, si se quedaba con los Burrage no podría recibir al señor Ransom. Olive confiaría en que no lo hiciera, y ella estaba decidida a no engañar más a Olive en el futuro ni a ocultarle nada, sin importarle lo que hubiera hecho en el pasado. No quería volver a incurrir en las mismas faltas, pensaba que podría evitarlas. Fue la idea del futuro inmediato que la esperaba en Nueva York, del que su presente acompañante quedaría absolutamente excluido, lo que provocó en su ánimo un rápido cambio, haciéndola acceder a sus peticiones, a fin de poder compensarlo anticipadamente por lo que no podría hacer por él después. Pero lo que más la disgustaba era que él la considerara comprometida con otra persona. A decir verdad, no sabía por qué debía preocuparle aquello; y lo cierto era que en aquel momento los sentimientos de la joven no resultaban claros ni para ella misma. No veía qué utilidad podía tener que su amistad con el señor Ransom se volviera más íntima (ya que el interés de él parecía realmente personal); y por eso le preguntó por qué deseaba salir con ella, y si había algo especial que quisiera decirle (no había nadie como Verena para decir frases aparentemente coquetas, con la mejor buena fe y la intención más inocente del mundo), como si eso no constituyera una razón válida para deshacerse de él de una vez por todas.

—Por supuesto que tengo algo especial que decirle… Tengo una tremenda cantidad de cosas que decirle —exclamó el joven—. Muchas más de las que podría decir en esta habitación fría y oprimente, pública para colmo, de modo que cualquiera podría entrar y oírlas en cualquier momento. Además —añadió sofisticamente—, no es conveniente que le haga una visita de tres horas.

Verena no percibió el sofisma, ni le preguntó si sería más conveniente que ella vagara por la ciudad en su compañía durante el mismo período de tiempo; solo dijo:

—¿Es algo que me va a resultar interesante oír, o que me hará bien?

—Bueno, yo creo que le hará bien; aunque me imagino que no le resultará demasiado interesante. —Basil Ransom tuvo un momento de duda, y luego, con una sonrisa, prosiguió—: Es para decirle de una vez por todas lo mucho que en verdad difiero de usted —dijo esto un poco al azar, pero resultó una feliz inspiración.

Si se trataba solo de eso, Verena pensó que podía ir, ya que no era un asunto personal.

—Bueno, me alegra que tome tan en serio el problema —respondió, meditabunda. Pero tenía también otro escrúpulo, y lo expresó al decir que le gustaría que Olive la encontrara en la pensión a su regreso.

—Me parece muy bien —respondió Ransom—; pero, ¿acaso considera que solo ella tiene derecho a salir? ¿Espera acaso que monte usted guardia en la casa únicamente porque ella ha salido? Si ella permanece fuera un buen rato tal vez la encuentre a usted a su regreso.

—El que haya salido significa que confía en mí —dijo Verena con un candor que la alarmó a sí misma apenas hubo pronunciado esas palabras.

Su alarma era justificada, pues en ese instante Basil Ransom se aferró a aquellas palabras con un tono entre asombrado y burlón:

—¿Confía en usted? ¿Y por qué no debía confiar en usted? ¿Es usted una niñita de diez años y ella su institutriz? ¿No disfruta usted de ninguna libertad? ¿La vigila a usted mi prima y la obliga a darle explicaciones? ¿Tiene usted instintos de vagabunda para que solo se considere segura cuando está usted entre cuatro paredes?

Ransom iba a continuar hablando, en el mismo tono, del hecho de que ella considerara necesario mantener a Olive en la ignorancia sobre su visita a Cambridge, tema al que implícitamente habían aludido en su breve charla en casa de la señora Burrage; pero en ese momento advirtió que ya había dicho bastante. En cuanto a Verena, sentía que ella había dicho más de la cuenta, y la manera más simple para reparar su error era irse a poner el sombrero y la capa y dejar que él la condujera a donde mejor

le pareciera. Cinco minutos después Ransom daba vueltas por la sala, esperando a que Verena se preparara para salir.

Fueron a Central Park utilizando el ferrocarril elevado, y Verena pensó por el camino que de cualquier manera Olive estaba probablemente tomando decisiones por ella en casa de la señora Burrage y que por consiguiente no había nada de malo en hacer ese pequeño paseo bajo su propia responsabilidad; además, se trataría únicamente de una hora, que correspondería a la duración de la ausencia de Olive. Lo hermoso del «elevado» era que llevaba hasta el parque y permitía regresar en unos cuantos minutos, dejando todo el resto de la hora para caminar y ver el lugar. El parque mostraba ese día un aspecto agradable que se sintió feliz de visitarlo por segunda vez. El estrecho y largo jardín a través del cual las casas situadas en las calles que lo circundan se miran unas a otras por medio de sus brillantes ventanas, temblaba bajo la cruda delicadeza de aquel abril y, a pesar de sus túneles y grutas cavados en las rocas, sus pabellones y estatuas, sus múltiples senderos y veredas, los lagos demasiado amplios para aquel paisaje, y los puentes demasiado grandes para aquellos lagos, expresaba toda la fragancia y frescura del momento más encantador del año. Tan pronto como Verena comenzó a caminar, el espíritu del día se apoderó de ella; se alegró de haber ido, se olvidó de Olive, disfrutó de la sensación de vagabundear por una gran ciudad con un notable joven que la atendía de la manera más galante, mientras que nadie más en el mundo sabía dónde se encontraba. Era un paseo muy diferente del que había hecho el día anterior con el señor Burrage, era un paseo más libre, más intenso, más rico en incidentes divertidos y en posibilidades de acción. Esa mañana podía detenerse y mirar todo lo que quisiera, y saciar todas sus curiosidades, hasta las más infantiles; se sentía como si fuera a pasar al aire libre todo el día, aunque no fuera así; en fin, se sentía como no se había sentido desde que era niña, en el campo, una o dos veces en que sus padres habían tomado vacaciones estivales y habían salido de la ciudad como la gente elegante; ella, con una compañera, se había alejado de casa y había pasado horas y horas en los bosques y en los campos en busca de frambuesas y jugando a ser gitanas. Basil Ransom había comenzado por proponer, astutamente, que debía acompañarlo a comer en alguna parte; habían salido del hotel de la calle Diez Oeste media hora antes de que se sirviera la comida, y él insistía en que le debía la compensación de ver que

se alimentaba como era debido; conocía un restaurante francés muy tranquilo y lujoso cerca del final de la Quinta Avenida; lo que no le dijo era que lo conocía por haber comido allí en una ocasión con la señora Luna. Verena por el momento declinó su ofrecimiento; dijo que disponía de tan poco tiempo que en verdad no valía la pena; no sentiría hambre; para ella el comer no significaba nada; ya comería cuando regresara al hotel. Cuando Ransom volvió a insistir, la joven dijo que ya se vería más tarde, que le avisaría en el caso de que sintiera apetito. A ella le habría gustado inmensamente ir con él a un restaurante, y sin embargo sentía cierto temor, el mismo que sintió en los intervalos de sus rápidas pulsaciones de gozo, durante toda aquella excursión, sin saber exactamente por qué había aceptado, aunque se sentía muy feliz, y reflexionaba que no había nada, en realidad, que el señor Ransom le dijera que tuviera un carácter estrictamente íntimo. Ransom sabía muy bien lo que se proponía cuando invitó a Verena a compartir con él el almuerzo; estaba dentro de sus planes el que ella se sentara frente a él a una pequeña mesita, extrajera la servilleta del curioso servilletero, sonriéndole, mientras él diría ciertas cosas que martillearían, como el recuerdo de cierta melodía olvidada, en su imaginación, esperando que les sirvieran algo extremadamente bueno y un tanto peculiar, elegido en la *carte* francesa. Eso no era de ninguna manera compatible con el hecho de que la joven regresara a su pensión hora y media después como parecía ser su intención. Visitaron los animales del pequeño jardín zoológico que constituye uno de los atractivos de Central Park; observaron los cisnes en su hermoso lago artificial, y hasta llegaron a considerar la posibilidad de tomar un bote por media hora, ya que Ransom decía que solo faltaba eso para que el paseo fuera completo. Verena respondió que no veía por qué debía ser completo, y después de recorrer los tortuosos senderos del Paseo se perdieron en el Laberinto, y admiraron todas las estatuas y bustos de hombres ilustres con que estaban decorados los parterres; se contentaron con reposar en una banca apartada, donde podían admirar un hermoso paisaje a la distancia y era muy raro que pasara algún peatón ocasional.

Para ese momento habían sostenido una larga conversación, ninguno de cuyos puntos, sin embargo, le había parecido serio a Verena. El señor Ransom continuaba bromeando sobre todas las cosas, incluso sobre la emancipación de las mujeres; Verena, que había vivido siempre con personas que tomaban el mundo muy en serio, no había oído jamás

nada tan corrosivo, ni escuchado tantas frases sarcásticas dirigidas contra las instituciones del país y las tendencias de la época. Al principio había comenzado a responderle, a contradecirlo, mostrando una alta capacidad polémica, volviendo todas las irreverencias de Ransom contra él mismo; tenía una mente demasiado rápida e ingeniosa como para no ser capaz de pensar en algo que oponer a los argumentos que él aducía. Pero poco a poco se fue fatigando y entristeciendo; había sido educada para admirar las nuevas ideas, criticar las instituciones sociales que uno encontraba en todas partes y desaprobar una gran cantidad de cosas, y sin embargo nunca había soñado encontrar un desprecio tan total como el del señor Ransom, tanta amargura como veía escondida bajo sus exageraciones y sus distorsiones. Sabía que era un conservador ferviente, pero no sabía que ser un conservador significara que una persona pudiera ser tan agresiva y despiadada. Pensaba que los conservadores eran personas obtusas y tercas, satisfechas de sí mismas, y satisfechas también con el orden social imperante; pero el señor Ransom no parecía estar más satisfecho con la realidad presente que con la que ella deseaba que existiera, y estaba dispuesto a decir sobre algunos de los que ella pensaba que militaban en las mismas filas que él cosas peores de lo que la joven consideraría justo decir sobre casi nadie. Después de un rato se desinteresó en discutir con él, y se preguntó qué habría podido ocurrirle en la vida para haberlo vuelto tan perverso. Posiblemente algo malo le había pasado… había tenido una desgracia que oscureció toda su visión del mundo. Era un cínico, había oído hablar a menudo de aquel estado mental aunque nunca se le había presentado la oportunidad de conocerlo, ya que toda la gente que conocía se preocupaba, si era posible, demasiado. De la historia personal de Basil Ransom solo conocía lo que Olive le había dicho, y aquello no era sino un esquema general, que dejaba amplio espacio a dramas íntimos, desilusiones secretas y sufrimientos. Mientras permaneció sentada a su lado pensó en algunas de esas cosas, se preguntó si él no estaría pensando en ellas cuando afirmaba, por ejemplo, que estaba asqueado de toda la charlatanería moderna sobre la libertad y que no simpatizaba con quienes deseaban extenderla. Lo que el mundo necesitaba para funcionar bien era que la gente hiciera un uso mejor de la libertad que poseía. Estas declaraciones hacían que Verena perdiera hasta el aliento; no concebía que fuera posible que alguien en el siglo XIX pudiera decir semejantes cosas, ni siquiera las

personas más retrógradas. Aquello era coherente con las befas del joven sobre la difusión de la cultura; la difusión de la cultura, desde su punto de vista, no era sino una gigantesca farsa; la gente se llenaba la cabeza con una gran cantidad de fraseología hueca que le impedía hacer su trabajo tranquila y honestamente. Solo tenían derecho a la educación las personas inteligentes, y si se observaba el asunto con el verdadero deseo de ver las cosas como realmente eran, uno advertía inmediatamente que la inteligencia era un lujo muy raro, el atributo de una persona entre ciento. De cualquier manera, parecía tener una opinión muy baja de la humanidad en general. Verena tenía la esperanza de que algo verdaderamente horrible le hubiera sucedido… no para satisfacer ningún resentimiento que él hubiera podido suscitar, sino para poder tener una razón que la ayudara a perdonarlo por tanto desprecio y tanta brutalidad. Quería perdonarlo, porque después de que se hubieron sentado en una banca durante una media hora y su espíritu crítico hubiera cedido un poco, tanto que hablaba con mayor consideración (al menos así parecía) y mayor sinceridad, un extraño sentimiento se había apoderado de ella, una perfecta determinación de no seguir defendiendo sus propios puntos de vista, y un deseo de no separarse de él simplemente con una acentuación de sus divergencias. Yo califico de extraña la naturaleza de sus reflexiones, ya que en secreto estas combatían entre sí mientras ella escuchaba, en aquella atmósfera cálida y tranquila donde apenas llegaban los ecos distantes de la inmensa ciudad, esa voz de tonos profundos, dulces, potentes, que expresaba en exóticas cadencias los conceptos más monstruosos, y esa risa suave e íntima que, cuando se inclinaba hacia delante, casi le acariciaba las mejillas y el oído. Le pareció extraordinariamente duro, casi cruel, haberla llevado a pasear solo para decirle cosas que, después de todo, aunque se sentía con toda la libertad para contradecirlas, y pese a la tolerancia que la caracterizaba, solo podían producirle dolor; sin embargo, pesaba sobre ella una especie de encantamiento mientras lo escuchaba; había en su naturaleza un elemento de sumisión, le gustaba casi ser subyugada. Podía permanecer en silencio cuando la gente se aferraba a determinadas posiciones, en un silencio no rencoroso. Toda su relación con Olive era una especie de tácito y delicado consentimiento a una insistencia apasionada, y si había terminado por serle fácil y agradable (y en realidad nunca había sido de otra manera) podrá suponerse que la lucha por ceder a una voluntad que ella

llegaba a considerar aún más férrea que la de Olive, no debía durar demasiado. La voluntad de Ransom tenía el efecto de hacerla permanecer en aquel banco aun cuando se diera cuenta de que la tarde pasaba, que Olive regresaría y la encontraría ausente, y que nuevamente se sumergiría en amargas olas de ansiedad. Ella la vio, en efecto, como debía estar en ese momento, colocada frente a la ventana de su habitación en la calle Diez, observando cualquier señal que le indicara su regreso, escuchando cada paso en la escalera, su voz en el vestíbulo. Verena contempló aquella imagen como si fuera un retrato pintado, percibió todo lo que representaba, cada uno de sus detalles. Si no la conmovió más aún, ni la hacía ponerse de pie, escapar de Basil Ransom y regresar a toda prisa a los brazos de su amiga, era porque tenía conciencia de que el tormento que le infligía a su amiga no se volvería a repetir. Esa era la última vez que accedería a sentarse al lado del señor Ransom para oírlo expresarse en una manera tan adversa a lo que constituía su propia vida; la experiencia había sido tan personal y tan completa que por un momento se olvidó también de que era la primera vez que eso le ocurría. Parecía que la estaba viviendo desde hacía varios meses. Verena sabía perfectamente que todo aquello no la conduciría a nada, ya que cada cual debe dirigir su propia vida; era imposible dirigir la vida de otra persona, especialmente cuando esa persona era tan diferente, tan arbitraria e inescrupulosa.

XXXIV

—Me imagino que es usted la única persona en todo el país que alimenta esos sentimientos —observó la joven al fin.

—No soy la única persona que siente así, pero muy posiblemente sea la única que piensa así. Se me ocurre que mis convicciones existen en una forma vaga y poco precisa en la mente de muchos de mis conciudadanos. Si algún día logro expresarlas de la manera debida habré formulado en términos precisos los instintos subterráneos de una minoría bastante considerable.

—¡Me alegra oírle admitir que se trata de una minoría! —exclamó Verena—. Para nosotras, las gentes indefensas, eso es una fortuna. ¿Y qué quiere decir cuando habla de expresar sus sentimientos de la manera debida? ¿Debo entender que desea ser presidente de Estados Unidos?

—¿Para expresar mis puntos de vista en vibrantes mensajes al Senado? Eso es exactamente lo que me gustaría poder hacer; usted lee mis aspiraciones maravillosamente bien.

—¿Y considera que ha dado los pasos necesarios en ese sentido? —preguntó Verena.

A Ransom le pareció que el tono en que aquella pregunta había sido expresada trataba de aludir de una manera irónica a sus presentes condiciones de miseria, así que por un momento no dijo nada, fue un momento en que si su acompañante hubiera contemplado su rostro lo hubiera visto adornado por un incipiente rubor. Ransom consideró las palabras de Verena como una repentina broma de parte de la joven, cosa que era perfectamente legítima, pues ella tenía todo el derecho del mundo a defenderse. Pensó que deseaba recordarle en otros términos (así por lo menos su exagerado orgullo sureño, su excesiva sensibilidad, interpretaron el asunto) la idea de que un caballero

tan terriblemente atrasado en el camino de la fortuna no tenía derecho a hacer perder el tiempo a una joven brillante, consagrada por el éxito, ni siquiera para poder convencerse de que debía renunciar a ella. Pero este reproche solo agudizó su deseo de hacerle sentir que si había renunciado, era precisamente debido a la desfavorable y accidental posición que ocupaba en la vida; que, de no ser así —llegó tan lejos como para jactarse de ello—, hubiera podido triunfar sobre todo el cúmulo de prejuicios acumulados por Verena, sobre todos los obstáculos que su notoriedad interponía. El sentimiento más profundo en el pecho de Ransom en relación con ella era la convicción de que la muchacha había sido creada para el amor, como se había dicho a sí mismo mientras la escuchaba en casa de la señora Burrage. Ella era absolutamente inconsciente de ese hecho, y otro ideal, crudo, vacío y ficticio, se había interpuesto entre ella y los demás; pero, en presencia de un hombre por quien realmente se interesase, aquella estructura falsa y vacilante se derrumbaría miserablemente, y la emancipación del sexo de Olive Chancellor (pero ¿qué sexo era aquel, santo cielo?, se preguntaba despectivamente) sería relegada a un reino de sombras, de palabras muertas. El lector podrá darse cuenta por consiguiente si una impresión como aquella podía hacerle a Basil Ransom más admisible el creer que sería una indelicadeza de su parte cortejarla. A Ransom le habría ofendido inmensamente aquella imputación si alguien se la hubiera hecho.

—¡Ah, señorita Tarrant, mi éxito en la vida es una cosa, y mis ambiciones son otra! —exclamó en aquel momento, en respuesta a su pregunta—. Nada me parece más probable que permanecer pobre y en la absoluta oscuridad durante el resto de mis días; y en ese caso, nadie fuera de mí sabrá qué visiones de grandeza he sofocado y sepultado en mi interior.

—¿Por qué habla de pobreza y oscuridad? ¿No marchan bien sus negocios en esta ciudad?

Esta pregunta de Verena no le permitió recordar que tanto a la señora Luna como a Olive les había hecho creer siempre que sus perspectivas profesionales eran muy buenas, y que cualquier opinión que la muchacha pudiera tener al respecto provenía de lo que aquellas damas creyeran. Aquellas palabras sonaron a sus oídos tan zumbonamente burlonas, desafiantes, involuntariamente ofensivas que, por única

respuesta, le pareció que debía tender un brazo hacia ella, tomarla por la cintura, atraerla hacia sí como para permitirle dar un resumen conciso sobre su situación en la forma de un beso deliberado. Si el momento de que hablo hubiera durado unos pocos segundos más, me hubiera tenido que ver en la dificultad de describir algo por el estilo; afortunadamente fue impedido por la aparición de una niñera que empujaba un cochecito, seguida por un niño que daba sus primeros pasos. Tanto la gobernanta como el niño los miraron fijamente, al menos eso le pareció a Ransom, y mientras Verena observaba con ojo atento a los niños (adoraba a los niños) continuó:

—Me parece bastante vulgar de su parte hablar de permanecer en la oscuridad. Por supuesto, usted es ambicioso; todo el mundo puede verlo. Y una vez que sus ambiciones sigan un cauce determinado la gente hará bien en seguirlo. ¡Con su voluntad! —añadió con una especie de candor burlón.

—¿Qué sabe usted sobre mi voluntad? —le preguntó sonriendo torpemente, como si en verdad hubiera intentado besarla en el curso de la segunda entrevista a solas que le había concedido, y hubiese sido rechazado.

—Sé que es más fuerte que la mía. Me ha convencido para salir cuando yo pensaba que era mejor no hacerlo, y me tiene sentada aquí, cuando desde hace un buen rato debía haber vuelto al hotel.

—¡Concédame el día entero, señorita Tarrant, concédame el día! —murmuró Basil Ransom; y ella se volvió a mirarlo, conmovida por la expresión de su voz, que insistía —: Venga a comer conmigo. ¿Es posible que no se sienta usted fatigada y débil?

—Me siento fatigada y débil por todas las cosas horribles que me ha dicho. Se ha expresado abominablemente, ¿y ahora quiere que vaya a comer con usted? Muchas gracias. ¡Creo que es usted un insolente! —gritó Verena con una risa que el cronista sabe que era la expresión de cierta vergüenza, lo cual Basil Ransom no podía saber.

—Debe usted recordar que en dos ocasiones la he escuchado durante una hora, sin hablar, en un silencio humilde y atento, y que probablemente volveré a hacerlo muchas veces más.

—¿Por qué va usted a escucharme nuevamente, cuando desprecia mis ideas?

—No voy a escuchar sus ideas; lo que oigo es su voz.

—¡Ah, se lo había dicho a Olive! —dijo rápidamente Verena, como si sus palabras fueran la confirmación de un viejo temor; un temor general, sin embargo, y que no se relacionaba particularmente con él.

Ransom seguía teniendo la impresión de que no le estaba haciendo la corte, especialmente cuando observó, con toda la superioridad del varón:

—Me pregunto si habrá comprendido diez palabras de todo lo que le he dicho.

—Me parece que ha sido usted demasiado claro; y además ha insistido demasiado.

—¿Qué fue entonces lo que comprendió?

—¡Cómo! Pues que desea usted que retrocedamos a un situación peor que la que hemos soportado en cualquier otra época.

—He estado bromeando; he exagerado a propósito —dijo Ransom, haciéndole a la muchacha esa inesperada concesión. De vez en cuando parecía distraerse, ausentarse, perder interés en la discusión.

Ella logró darse cuenta y en cierto momento le preguntó:

—¿Por qué no expone usted por escrito sus ideas?

Esa frase volvió a hacerle recordar su fracaso; era curioso cómo ella parecía no poder evitarlo, cómo a cada momento tenía que asestarle un golpe.

—¿Se refiere a exponerlas al público? He escrito muchas cosas pero no encuentro a nadie que desee publicarlas.

—Por lo que parece no hay tanta gente, no tanta al menos como usted decía, que piense como usted.

—¡Bah! —dijo Basil Ransom—, los editores constituyen un grupo mezquino y cobarde; dicen siempre que quieren algo original, pero se mueren de miedo cuando se les presenta.

—¿Se trata de periódicos, de revistas? —A medida que penetraba más profundamente en la mente de Verena el pensamiento de que los artículos de aquel joven notable habían sido rechazados (artículos en los que, aparentemente, se ridiculizaba y despreciaba todo lo que a ella le era más querido), sentía un sentimiento de piedad y de tristeza, un sentimiento de estar ante algo injusto—. Siento mucho que no logre usted hacer publicar sus artículos —dijo, con una sencillez que hizo que él levantara la mirada de la figura que estaba trazando en el suelo con su bastón, para ver

si aquel tono era auténtico. Percibió que la joven hablaba sinceramente, y ella añadió que consideraba que siempre resultaba muy difícil publicar algo; recordó, aunque no mencionó el hecho, el poco éxito que su padre había tenido cada vez que lo había intentado. Esperaba que el señor Ransom no cejara en la empresa; al final es seguro que lo conseguiría. Luego continuó, sonriendo con cierta ironía—: Podría denunciarme públicamente, si así lo desea. Lo único que le pido es que no diga nada contra Olive Chancellor.

—¡Qué poco comprende usted lo que yo deseo obtener! —exclamó Basil Ransom—. Así son ustedes, las mujeres, todas iguales. No hacen sino pensar en sí mismas, siempre se refieren a algo personal, y siempre creen que los demás hacen lo mismo.

—Sí, tal es la acusación que nos hacen —dijo Verena, alegremente.

—Yo no me propongo escribir sobre usted, ni sobre la señorita Chancellor, ni sobre la señora Farrinder, ni sobre la señorita Birdseye, ni sobre el espectro de Eliza P. Moseley, ni sobre ninguna otra criatura con dones especiales que habite en este mundo, o en el otro.

—Oh, supongo que no se propondrá usted destruirnos por omisión, por silencio —exclamó Verena con el mismo brillo.

—No, no quiero destruirlas, pero tampoco me propongo salvarlas. Ya se ha hablado demasiado sobre ustedes, y por mi parte deseo dejarlas en paz. Lo que me interesa es mi propio sexo; el otro es evidente que puede arreglárselas por su cuenta. Es al mío al que yo deseo salvar.

Verena observó que hablaba con mayor seriedad que antes; que había abandonado el tono satírico y hablaba gravemente, como con cierto cansancio, como si repentinamente se hubiera hartado de tanta charla.

—¿Salvarlo de qué? —preguntó ella.

—¡Del más detestable afeminamiento! Estoy muy lejos de suponer, como sostuvo usted la otra noche, que la mujer no interviene lo suficientemente en la vida pública, que se la ha relegado durante demasiado tiempo a la casa; yo creo que interviene demasiado. Toda la actual generación se ha afeminado; el tono masculino está desapareciendo de este mundo; vivimos en una era femenina, nerviosa, histérica, charlatana y estúpida, una era de frases vacías y falsas delicadezas, excesivas

preocupaciones y sensibilidades enfermizas, y si no le ponemos un freno inmediato culminará en el reino de la mediocridad, el más insulso, pretencioso y anodino que haya existido jamás. El carácter masculino, su capacidad para arriesgarse y soportar, conocer y a la vez no temer la realidad, mirar al mundo cara a cara y tomarlo por lo que es, una mezcla extraña donde abundan los peores elementos, eso es lo que quiero preservar, o, más bien, restaurar; y puedo decirle que no me importa nada lo que les ocurra a las mujeres mientras yo libro mi batalla.

El pobre joven se lanzó a exponer esas ideas estrechas (cuyo rechazo por los periódicos más importantes no nos debería, desde luego, sorprender) con una seriedad suave y profunda, inclinándose hacia ella como para expresarle mejor sus ideas, y olvidándose aparentemente por el momento de lo ofensivas que podían resultar expresadas en ese modo tranquilo y severo que no daba lugar a hipérboles. Verena no lograba reponerse; estaba demasiado impresionada por sus maneras y por la novedad de encontrarse con un hombre que adoptaba un aire casi religioso al exponer los principios de su causa. Supo en ese mismo instante, y de una vez para siempre, que el hombre que le había causado esa impresión no lograría cambiar nunca. Sintió un escalofrío, se sintió ligeramente enferma, aunque decía que ahora que él había resumido su credo de un modo tan claro y lúcido se sentía más satisfecha, sabía al fin con quién estaba tratando, una declaración que contrastaba abiertamente con los hechos, pues Verena nunca se había sentido menos satisfecha en toda su vida. El horror de la profesión de fe de su compañero la hacía temblar; le hubiera resultado difícil imaginar algo más brutalmente profano. Sin embargo, había decidido no manifestar ningún signo de debilidad y pensó que el modo mejor de encubrir sus emociones era comentar en un tono que, aunque no fuera empleado con ese fin, constituía la venganza más efectiva, ya que siempre producía de parte de Ransom una furiosa impotencia:

—Señor Ransom, le puedo asegurar que esta es una época que comienza a tomar conciencia.

—Eso es parte de un vocabulario hipócrita. Vivimos en una época de indecibles imposturas, como dice Carlyle.

—Muy bien —respondió Verena—, para usted resulta muy cómodo decir que nos deja en paz. Pero le es imposible dejarnos en paz. Nosotras estamos aquí y de alguna

manera nuestra presencia cuenta. Es necesario, pues, que nos coloque en alguna parte. ¡Qué notable sistema social ese del que habla y que no tiene sitio para nosotras! —continuó la muchacha sonriendo a la vez de la manera más encantadora.

—Ningún lugar público. Mi proyecto consiste en mantener a las mujeres en su casa y vivir con ellas allí mejor de lo que hasta ahora ha sido posible.

—Me alegra oír que algo va a ser mejor; las condiciones lo permiten. Pero se tendrá que enfrentar con las mujeres americanas cuando usted inicie un movimiento que consiste en mantenerlas más tiempo en casa.

—¡Dios mío, cómo la han pervertido! ¡Y han dicho que es usted un genio! —murmuró Ransom mirándola con ojos benévolos.

Pero ella no le hizo caso y continuó:

—¿Y qué va usted a hacer con aquellas que no cuentan siquiera con una casa… y usted sabe que son millones? Debe usted recordar que cada vez se casan menos mujeres, y la mayor parte de las que lo hacen son obligadas a contraer matrimonio; ya ese ha dejado de ser su único camino. No podrá usted decirles que se preocupen de su marido y de sus hijos cuando no tienen ni marido ni hijos que cuidar.

—¡Ese es solo un detalle marginal! Y en lo que a mí respecta, debo confesarle que siento tal veneración por su sexo en la vida privada, que estaría dispuesto a abogar por que un hombre pudiera tener media docena de esposas.

—¿Le parece entonces que la civilización de los turcos es superior a todas las demás?

—Los turcos tienen una religión de segunda categoría; son fatalistas, y eso los ha mantenido en un nivel inferior. Por otra parte, sus mujeres no son tan agradables como las nuestras, o como podrían ser las nuestras si lográramos erradicar esa pestilencia moderna. Piense en lo que llega usted a aceptar cuando opina que cada vez las mujeres se sienten menos atraídas por el matrimonio; esto solo viene a testimoniar el efecto negativo que su comportamiento tiene sobre su personalidad, sus modales y su naturaleza, esa fatua agitación.

—¡Muy elogioso en lo que a mí respecta! —exclamó Verena desenvueltamente.

Pero Ransom apenas reparó en su interrupción por la vehemencia con que exponía sus argumentos.

—Hay miles de maneras en que cualquier mujer, todas las mujeres, solteras o casadas, pueden encontrar una ocupación. Podrían lograr que la sociedad en que vivimos fuera más agradable.

—Agradable para los hombres, por supuesto.

—¿Y para quién más podría ser? Mi querida señorita Tarrant, ¡lo más agradable que tienen las mujeres es resultar agradables a los hombres! Esa es una verdad tan vieja como la raza humana, y no permita que Olive Chancellor la persuada de que ella y la señora Farrinder han inventado otra ocupación que pueda reemplazarla, o que sea más profunda y duradera.

Verena esquivó este punto de la discusión; se conformó solo con decir:

—Bueno, me alegra oírle decir que está preparado para ver el mundo colmado de viejas solteronas.

—No tengo nada que objetar contra las antiguas viejas; eran deliciosas; siempre tenían mucho que hacer, y no andaban vagabundeando por el mundo invocando a gritos una vocación. Es la nueva solterona vieja que han inventado ustedes de quien le ruego a Dios que me libre —no dijo que se refiriera expresamente a Olive Chancellor, pero Verena lo miró como si sospechara que fuera capaz de hacerlo; y para desviarla de aquella pista él volvió a tomar el discurso en el punto en que lo había dejado un momento atrás—. Y en cuanto a que no sea elogioso para usted, me refiero al efecto que esta perniciosa locura ejerce sobre las mujeres mismas, mi querida señorita Tarrant, debe sentirse tranquila. Usted constituye una categoría especial, ya que es una criatura única y extraordinaria. En usted todos los elementos se han fundido de una manera tan feliz que yo la considero como casi incorruptible. No sé de dónde procede, ni qué es lo que la ha llevado a ser lo que es, pero estoy seguro de que permanece al margen y por encima de todas las influencias vulgares. Además, ya debe saberlo —prosiguió el joven con un tono imperturbable, lento y estudiado, como si tratara de demostrar un teorema de geometría—, debe saber usted que su relación con todas esas fanáticas exaltadas es la cosa más irreal, ilusoria y accidental que hay en este mundo. Usted tiene la impresión de que cree en eso, pero en realidad no es así. Fueron conceptos que le han impuesto las circunstancias, por asociaciones desafortunadas, y usted aceptó como podía haber aceptado otra carga, tal es la dulzura de su carácter.

Siempre ha estado dispuesta a complacer a alguien, y ahora va dando conferencias por el país, tratando de tener éxito, a fin de resultarle agradable a la señorita Chancellor, así como antes lo hacía para complacer a sus padres. No ha sido usted, de ninguna manera, sino una pequeña figura altisonante (muy notable a su manera), a quien usted ha inventado y colocado a los pies de los otros, poniéndole cuerdas por detrás para hacerla moverse y hablar, mientras usted trata de esconderse y desaparecer. Ah, señorita Tarrant, si el deseo de agradar es el que la mueve, ¿por qué no trata usted de agradar a alguien que sepa apreciar sus virtudes arrojando lejos esa ridícula muñeca y reivindicando tanto su libertad como su encanto?

Mientras Basil Ransom hablaba, y hasta entonces no había hablado de esa manera, Verena permanecía sentada profundamente atenta, con la mirada fija en el suelo, pero tan pronto como él terminó, se levantó; algo le decía que en efecto su conversación había durado demasiado. Se apartó de él como si quisiera dejarlo solo, y a decir verdad aquel había sido su primer impulso. Ni siquiera quería levantar la mirada hacia él o continuar la conversación. «Algo», como he dicho, la hacía sentirse de esa manera, pero las extrañas maneras del joven, tan explícito y tranquilo, como si supiera toda la verdad con absoluta certeza, la atemorizaban en parte y en parte la enfurecían. Comenzó a caminar hacia una de las verjas, como si hubiera quedado establecido que debían marcharse de inmediato. Ransom había expuesto sus puntos de vista con absoluta claridad; si hubiera tenido una revelación no hubiera hablado con mayor claridad. Aquella descripción que había hecho de ella como si la joven fuera algo diferente de lo que estaba tratando de ser, la acusación de irrealidad, hacían que su corazón latiera dolorosamente; estaba segura, sin embargo, de que su ser real estaba allí al lado de él, donde no debía estar. Un momento después el joven la alcanzó; y mientras caminaban ella pensaba que algunas de las cosas que había oído superaban lo que Olive hubiera imaginado como lo peor. ¿Cuál sería su reacción, pobre y desamparada amiga olvidada, si le llegara un eco de esas frases? Verena se sentía tan afectada por el discurso de su compañero (también sus modales habían cambiado; parecían expresar algo diferente) que había decidido al instante interrumpir cualquier discusión y determinado que tan pronto como salieran del parque regresaría por su cuenta al hotel; pero era lo suficientemente dueña de sí como para pensar que era importante que no

diera ninguna señal de turbación, de reconocimiento de que se había visto obligada a huir. Le pareció que había escuchado y replicado a sus observaciones en la debida forma, sin tomarlas demasiado en consideración cuando dijo, volviendo un poco la cabeza y hablando sobre su hombro:

—Presumo, por todo lo que dice, que me considera una persona competente.

Él dudó antes de responder, mientras sus largas piernas alcanzaron con facilidad el rápido paso de Verena, su encantador, conmovedor y apresurado paso, que expresaba todo el temor que tan celosamente quería ocultar:

—Enormemente competente —dijo—, pero no en el campo en que se obstina usted en serlo, sino en una línea muy diferente, señorita Tarrant. Competente no me parece la palabra justa, yo más bien diría genial.

Sintió los ojos de Ransom clavados en su rostro, tan cercanos y tan fijos eran en aquel momento, después de responder a su pregunta. Había comenzado a ruborizarse: si Ransom la hubiera continuado mirando por más tiempo ella habría calificado su actitud de impertinente. Verena había sido felicitada desde un comienzo por Olive debido a su serenidad «cuando sostenía la mirada de centenares de personas»; pero la situación había cambiado un poco y se sentía incapaz de soportar la mirada de un individuo. Deseaba quitárselo de encima, volver a situarlo en el anonimato, y precisamente con ese fin después de un momento volvió a hacer otra pregunta:

—¿Debo entender entonces que nos considera usted como absolutamente inferiores?

—Para los fines públicos y cívicos las encuentro absolutamente inferiores; débiles y de segunda categoría. Nada me parece tan indicativo de los confusos sentimientos de nuestra época que el hecho de que cierto número de hombres pretendan contemplarlo bajo otra luz. Pero en privado, personalmente, ese es otro asunto. Es en el reino de la vida familiar y de los afectos domésticos…

En ese momento Verena lo interrumpió con una risa histérica.

—¡Por favor, no diga eso, se trata solo de una frase!

—Bueno, de cualquier manera es mejor que una de las suyas —dijo Basil Ransom saliendo con ella por una de las verjas menores, la primera a la que habían llegado.

Luego salieron a una especie de plaza formada por la calle que constituye el extremo sur del parque y el fin de la Sexta Avenida. La luz de aquella tarde espléndida se

posaba sobre todas las cosas, y el día parecía aún en pleno vigor. Las pérgolas y bosquecillos comenzaron a quedar tras ellos, los lagos artificiales y los paisajes artísticamente compuestos, dándole a toda la región un brillo especial, creando una clara sensación de aire y espacio, de fuertes colores naturales y de una vegetación demasiado rala para dar sombra. Las casas color de chocolate, altas y nuevas, le daban su especial fisonomía a aquel espacio; los tranvías se detenían al fondo de la plaza, cambiaban allí sus caballos empapados en sudor por otros, y recibían y descargaban pasajeros; había también unas cervecerías al aire libre que en Nueva York constituyen el elemento pintoresco, el color local buscado por los pintores y que se anunciaban con enormes carteles. Grupos de desocupados, hijos de la desilusión llegados desde el otro lado del océano, tomaban el sol apoyados contra los muros del parque, y por el otro lado el panorama comercial de la Sexta Avenida se deslizaba con una notable ausencia de perspectiva aérea.

—Debo volver al hotel; adiós —dijo Verena abruptamente a su compañero.

—¿Volver? Entonces ¿no vendrá a comer conmigo?

Verena conocía a personas que comían al mediodía y a otras que lo hacían en la noche, y a otras más que nunca comían; pero no había conocido a nadie que acostumbrara a comer a las tres y media de la tarde. La insistencia de Ransom en aquella idea le pareció extraña e inoportuna, y supuso que debía de atribuirse a las costumbres de Mississippi. Pero eso no fue suficiente como para que le resultara más tolerable la idea, a pesar de la desilusión que Ransom manifestaba con sus ojos relampagueantes; él parecía no haber percibido que si deseaba regresar a la calle Diez era porque quería estar sola.

—Debo dejarlo inmediatamente —le dijo—. Por favor, no me pida que me quede, no lo haría usted si supiera lo poco que lo deseo. —Los modales de la joven eran ahora tan diferentes, y también su expresión, que, pese a ser más sonriente que antes, nunca le había parecido a él tan seria.

—¿Quiere usted volver sola? No se lo permitiré —respondió Ransom, extremadamente enfadado por que se le pidiera hacer aquel sacrificio—. La he hecho recorrer una distancia inmensa, soy responsable de usted y debo dejarla en el mismo sitio en que la encontré.

—Señor Ransom, debo hacerlo y lo haré —exclamó en un tono que él aún no le había conocido; de modo que, sorprendido, turbado y afligido, el joven comprendió que sería inútil insistir.

Sabía desde el principio que su expedición debía terminar en una separación que no sería dulce, pero había alentado la esperanza de establecer él las condiciones. Cuando él le expresó el deseo de que le permitiera, al menos, dejarla en un coche, ella respondió que no deseaba un coche, quería volver a pie. Esta idea de verla marcharse por su cuenta no mejoraba la situación; pero al advertir su repentina impaciencia nerviosa Ransom sintió que había allí un misterio femenino y que era necesario acceder a que siguiera su curso.

—Me desagrada mucho más de lo que pueda usted sospechar, pero la obedeceré. Que el cielo proteja sus pasos, señorita Tarrant.

Ella movió la cara hacia otro lado, como si se estuviera librando de un anzuelo; luego añadió, del modo más inesperado:

—Espero que pronto publiquen algo suyo.

—¿Que se publiquen mis artículos? —Él se la quedó mirando y luego exclamó—: ¡Es usted un ser delicioso!

—Adiós —volvió a repetir, y esta vez le tendió la mano.

Ransom la retuvo durante un momento y le preguntó si en verdad abandonaría la ciudad tan pronto como para no permitirle volver a verla otra vez. A lo que ella respondió:

—Si permanezco aquí será en un lugar al que no podrá ir. No le permitirían visitarme.

Ransom no había tenido la intención de hacerle una pregunta tan precisa; se había impuesto ciertos límites. Pero aquel límite había caído de pronto.

—¿Se refiere usted a la casa donde la escuché hablar?

—Es posible que me quede allí unos cuantos días.

—Si me está prohibido ir a verla allí, ¿por qué me envió una invitación?

—Porque entonces me había propuesto convertirlo.

—¿Y ahora ya ha renunciado?

—No, no; me parece bien que siga siendo tal como es.

Tenía un aspecto extraño, con su sonrisa más mecánica, mientras decía esas palabras, y él no sabía qué era lo que le ocurría. Ya Verena se había alejado cuando él le gritó:

—Si se queda usted, iré a verla.

Ella no volvió la cara ni respondió, y todo lo que a Ransom le fue concedido fue observarla mientras se perdía de vista. Su espalda, su bella figura, parecían repetir aquel último enigma, que era casi un desafío.

Sin embargo, no había sido aquella la intención de Verena Tarrant. Deseaba, a pesar de su gran demora y del enojo de Olive, caminar hasta el hotel porque aquello le daría tiempo para pensar y volver a pensar lo contenta que estaba (real y verdaderamente *ahora*) de que el señor Ransom estuviera en la facción equivocada. ¡Si hubiera estado en la correcta…! No terminó ese pensamiento. Encontró que Olive la esperaba exactamente de la manera en que había previsto; volvió hacia ella, en el momento en que entró, un rostro de expresión bastante terrible. Verena le dio inmediatamente todas las explicaciones del caso, le contó lo que había estado haciendo; luego continuó, sin darle tiempo a su amiga para que hiciera preguntas o comentarios:

—¿Y tú? ¿Fuiste a visitar a la señora Burrage?

—Sí, tenía que hacerlo.

—¿Y volvió a insistir en que me quede con ellos?

—Sí, insistió muchísimo.

—¿Y tú, qué le dijiste?

—Dije muy poco, pero ella me dio todas las garantías posibles.

—¿Crees que debo quedarme?

—Ella asegura que se han vuelto devotos a nuestra causa y que hará que todo Nueva York se incline a tus pies.

Verena tomó a la señorita Chancellor por los hombros, y le lanzó una mirada, por un instante, en silencio. Luego estalló, apasionadamente:

—¡No me importa lo que ella asegure; no me importa nada Nueva York! No iré a visitarlos, no iré, ¿me entiendes? —Repentinamente su voz cambió; le pasó un brazo a Olive en torno a la cintura y sepultó el rostro en su cuello—. ¡Olive Chancellor, sácame de aquí, sácame de aquí! —continuó.

Un momento después Olive supo que la muchacha había estallado en sollozos y que todo el asunto estaba resuelto, el asunto que ella había analizado con tanta angustia un par de horas antes.

LIBRO TERCERO

XXXV

La oscuridad había caído definitivamente aquella noche de agosto, cuando Basil Ransom, terminada su cena, salió a la plaza frente al pequeño hotel donde se hospedaba. Era un hotel muy pequeño, de construcción frágil y barata; el paso de un hombre alto de Mississippi hizo que la escalera chirriara y que los vidrios de las ventanas tintinearan en sus marcos. Estaba muy hambriento a su llegada, ya que no había tenido ni siquiera un momento libre, ni en Boston ni de camino, para comer el frugal bocado con que había acostumbrado a su naturaleza a mantenerse entre el desayuno que consistía en una taza de café y la cena que consistía en una taza de té. Acababa de tomar una taza de té, de muy mala calidad, servida por una joven pálida y contrahecha, de rizos castaños, un cinturón de fantasía y una expresión de limitada tolerancia hacia un cliente que no se decidía con toda rapidez entre el pescado frito, la carne asada y los frijoles hervidos. El tren para Marmion había salido de Boston a las cuatro en punto de la tarde, dirigiéndose, sin prisas, hacia el cabo sur, mientras las sombras se alargaban en las praderas rocosas y los rayos oblicuos del sol doraban los bosques salvajes y teñían los estanques y los pantanos con un resplandor amarillo. La madurez del verano se cernía sobre el camino y, sin embargo, no había nada en la región que Basil Ransom atravesaba que pareciera susceptible de maduración; nada, sino las manzanas en los pequeños jardines, que producían una sensación de ácida fructificación aquí y allá, y los altos y dorados cañaverales que surgían del fondo de los diques de piedra desnuda. No había campos de trigo dorado; solo aquí y allá un montón de paja castaña. Pero había una especie de blando reposo en el paisaje y una dulzura creada por aquellos horizontes bajos y por el aire tibio, con la posibilidad de calina estival y de rincones ocultos donde en las mañanas de agosto el agua debía ser

de un azul luminoso. Ransom había oído decir que el Cabo era la Italia del estado de Massachusetts; se lo habían descrito como el somnoliento Cabo, el Cabo lánguido, el Cabo no de las tempestades, sino de la paz eterna. Sabía que las bostonianas habían sido atraídas, durante las semanas de mayor calor, por su influencia sedante, convencidas de que su aire tónico les proporcionaría una calma perfecta. En una actividad como la suya, donde abundaba la excitación nerviosa, no tenían ningún deseo de adquirir compromisos al abandonar la ciudad; ya estaban suficientemente comprometidas, durante todo el tiempo, con el sentimiento de todos los agravios que había sufrido su sexo. Querían vivir ociosamente, tenderse en hamacas, permanecer fuera del contacto de la multitud y el estruendo de los balnearios. Ransom pudo ver que en Marmion no había ninguna multitud, aunque sí algo de estrépito, procedente del único vehículo que esperaba fuera de la pequeña estación, solitaria, con aspecto más bien de cabaña, tan distante de la población que, por más que uno mirara a lo largo del camino polvoriento, que se suponía que debía de conducir a ella, lo único que se podía divisar era el terreno baldío a ambos lados. Seis u ocho hombres con ropa de trabajo, que acarreaban paquetes y sacos de viaje, se lanzaron sobre aquel solitario y raquítico medio de transporte, de manera que Ransom pudo adivinar su propia suerte, mientras el malhumorado conductor del vehículo, un ciudadano delgado y tambaleante, con un cuello largo y una barbilla rala, le previno que si deseaba llegar a un hotel antes de que oscureciera debía darse prisa. Su maleta fue colocada de manera precaria en la parte posterior del vehículo.

—Bueno, ya veremos —comentó tristemente el conductor cuando Rasom protestó por la colocación insegura de la maleta.

Reconoció la calidad meridional de aquel pintoresco fatalismo, y pensó que la señorita Chancellor y Verena debían sentirse en verdad relajadas si se habían entregado al genio del lugar. Esto era lo que él esperaba y lo que le hacía concebir ciertas esperanzas mientras se subía, el único individuo de todo el grupo que había bajado del tren, a la parte trasera de la sobrecargada diligencia. Aquello lo ayudó a disfrutar el primer paseo campestre de que había gozado en muchos meses, más que meses, años; tanto que se impuso a su mente la reflexión (el suave, amplio escenario que comenzaba a oscurecerse por el crepúsculo la sugería a cada paso) de que las dos jóvenes que

constituían en Marmion la completa prefiguración del círculo social de Ransom, debían, en un lugar como aquel, de beneficiarse de unas vacaciones completas. La idea de todos los males que aún tenían que corregir debía de ser más ligera allí que en Boston. Durante una hora el ardiente joven mantuvo la ilusión de que hubieran abandonado sus opiniones en la ciudad. Amaba hasta el mismo olor de la tierra sobre la que avanzaba. Frescas y suaves bocanadas de aire nocturno lo acariciaban a cada vuelta del camino. Basil se sentía renovado; había respirado el aliento de la naturaleza; había evaluado su pesado trabajo en Nueva York, sin un solo período de vacaciones, con la repetición del movimiento cotidiano de un lado a otro en la gran, rectilínea y enloquecedora ciudad, como un ladrillo en una pared o la lanzadera de un telar.

Encendió un cigarro en el vestíbulo del hotel: una pequeña habitación a la derecha de la puerta, donde un libro de registro con borrosas inscripciones llevaba una terrible vida pública en un escritorio desnudo, y cuyas páginas amarilleaban antes de ser enteramente rellenadas. Personajes locales, de vaga identidad, acostumbraban a reunirse en aquel lugar, como pudo advertir Ransom al día siguiente, a todas horas. Inclinaban sus sillas hacia atrás, las apoyaban contra la pared, hablaban muy raramente, y se hubiera podido suponer, ya que su vista convergía en el mismo sitio, que estaban observando algo por la ventana, en el caso de que hubiera algo en Marmion que pudiera ser observado. De vez en cuando alguno se levantaba y se dirigía al escritorio, sobre el que apoyaba los codos, hundiendo en un par de hombros inmensos un cuello sin corbata. Por quincuagésima vez examinaba la página, manchada por las moscas, del libro de registro, donde los nombres se seguían uno a otro con amplios saltos en las fechas. Los otros lo observaban mientras hacía eso, o contemplaban en silencio a algún huésped del hotel, cuando tal personaje entraba en aquel lugar con el aspecto de querer quejarse de la irresponsabilidad general que regía el establecimiento y no encontraba sino a los filósofos del pueblo a quienes dirigirse. Era un establecimiento manejado por agentes invisibles y esquivos, que tenían una especie de fortaleza en el salón comedor, el cual permanecía cerrado a todos, salvo a la hora de las comidas. Según la tradición un «muchacho» ejercía alguna función tutelar en lo que se refería al ruinoso registro, pero cuando se le buscaba lo más habitual era que aquel círculo imparcial que llenaba el salón dijera que debía de encontrarse en alguna parte de los alrededores o que se

había ido a pescar. Excepto la altiva camarera que le sirvió la cena a Ransom, y que también solo salía a la hora de las comidas de su mística reclusión, este joven inencontrable era la única persona en el local que representaba al servicio doméstico. Se veía a señoras ansiosas, envueltas en chales, esperándolo como si hubiera sido el doctor, sentadas en las mecedoras del pequeño vestíbulo público; otras miraban con vaga curiosidad por las puertas y ventanas, pensando que si se encontraba en los alrededores tal vez podrían verlo. Algunas veces los huéspedes llegaban a la puerta del comedor y trataban, con cierta timidez, de darle vuelta a la manija con el propósito de abrirla; luego, al advertir que estaba firmemente cerrada, regresaban, tímidos y avergonzados, hacia donde estaban los demás. Había quienes llegaban a decir que aquel no les parecía un buen hotel.

Sin embargo, a Ransom no le importaba si era bueno o no; no había viajado hasta Marmion preocupado por las excelencias de un hotel. Sin embargo, una vez que llegó no supo exactamente qué debía hacer; su línea de conducta le parecía menos fácil de lo que había sido la noche anterior, cuando fatigado, harto del aire de la ciudad, con verdadera ansia por tomarse un descanso, había decidido tomar el primer tren de la mañana para Boston y transbordar allí a otro que lo conduciría a las playas de la bahía de Buzzard. El hotel en sí mismo ofrecía pocos servicios; los huéspedes no eran numerosos; se movían un poco en el exterior, en la pequeña plaza y en el poco atractivo patio que se interponía entre el edificio y la carretera, o se sumergían en sus butacas a la hora del crepúsculo. La contemplación del crepúsculo se le presentaba a Ransom como el único entretenimiento posible. Aunque se sintiera penetrado por aquel curioso y puro olor de tierra que en Nueva Inglaterra, en el verano, flota en el aire nocturno, Ransom reflexionó sobre que el lugar debía de ser poco atractivo para las personas que no acudían a él, como era su caso, con el propósito de tomar posesión de Verena Tarrant. Aquella inhospitalaria posada, que le sugería de modo terrible a Ransom (y él aborrecía tal costumbre) la necesidad de acostarse temprano, parecía no tener relación con nada, ni siquiera con ella misma; pero otro inquilino, a quien preguntó al respecto, le informó de que la población estaba diseminada por los alrededores. Basil caminó por la carretera, en busca de aquella, bajo las estrellas, fumando uno de sus buenos cigarros, lo que constituía su único tributo al lujo. Consideró que era difícil que

iniciara su campaña esa misma noche; debía darles a las bostonianas noticias previas de su aparición en la escena. Pensó que en efecto era muy posible que ellas fueran partidarias del vil hábito de «retirarse» a la hora en que lo hacían las gallinas. Estaba seguro de que era una de las cosas que Olive Chancellor haría mientras él permaneciera en el lugar, con el propósito de molestarlo; haría que Verena se acostara a horas absurdas, solo para privarlo de disfrutar de las veladas. Caminó un buen rato sin encontrar a ninguna criatura ni vislumbrar un solo lugar habitado, pero disfrutó de la espléndida luz de las estrellas, de la tranquilidad, de la áspera melancolía de los grillos, que parecían vivificar todas las formas vagas del paisaje alrededor de él; la impresión total fue la de recibir un baño de frescura después de la tensión constante de los dos últimos años y las recientes y agobiantes semanas en Nueva York. Diez minutos más tarde (había caminado lentamente), una figura comenzó a aproximarse, al principio borrosa, pero después fue apareciendo con mayor claridad y definiéndose como una figura femenina. Caminaba, al parecer, sin objetivo, como él, sin otro fin que no fuera el de mirar las estrellas; en un momento se detuvo a contemplarlas echando hacia atrás la cabeza, mientras él se acercaba a ella. Enseguida estuvo muy cerca; vio que ella lo miraba, a través de la claridad nocturna, mientras pasaban uno al lado del otro. Era pequeña y delgada; Ransom reconoció su cabeza y su rostro, advirtió que llevaba el pelo muy corto; tuvo la impresión de haberla visto antes. Se dio cuenta de que ella volvía la cabeza igual que él y de que había una especie de reconocimiento en sus movimientos. Entonces tuvo la seguridad de conocerla y antes de que ella hubiera aumentado la distancia que los separaba Ransom se detuvo de pronto. La mujer, al advertir que él se detenía, hizo lo mismo, y por un instante permanecieron cara a cara, a cierta distancia, en medio de la oscuridad.

—Perdone… ¿no es usted la doctora Prance? —preguntó Basil Ransom.

Durante un minuto no se produjo ninguna respuesta; luego se oyó la voz de la pequeña mujer:

—Sí, señor; soy la doctora Prance. ¿Hay alguien enfermo en el hotel?

—Espero que no, no lo sé —dijo Ransom riéndose.

Luego dio unos cuantos pasos hacia ella, mencionó su nombre, le recordó haberla conocido en casa de la señorita Birdseye, hacía bastante tiempo (casi dos años), y

expresó la esperanza de que ella no lo hubiese olvidado.

Ella se quedó pensando unos minutos; era evidente que no estaba acostumbrada a frases vacías ni a afirmaciones vagas.

—Me parece que fue la noche en que hizo su aparición la señorita Tarrant.

—Fue precisamente aquella noche. Recuerdo que tuvimos una conversación muy interesante.

—De lo que me acuerdo es de que perdí mucho tiempo esa noche —dijo la doctora Prance.

—No lo sé, pero me parece que fue usted compensada de otra manera —replicó Ransom todavía riéndose.

Vio sus pequeños ojos brillantes que se encontraban con los suyos. Al parecer residía en el pueblo, y había salido, con la cabeza descubierta, a dar un paseo nocturno, y si fuera posible imaginarse a la doctora Prance aburrida y en busca de una distracción, la manera en que se quedó allí como si estuviera dispuesta a sostener otra conversación, le habría podido sugerir a Basil Ransom que esa, en efecto, era su situación.

—¿No considera usted que la carrera de ella es realmente notable?

—Oh, sí, hoy día todo es notable; ¡vivimos en una época de prodigios! —respondió el joven, muy divertido de encontrarse discutiendo sobre el objeto de su adoración, de esa manera casual, en la oscuridad, en una carretera solitaria en medio del campo, con una mujer médica de cabellos cortos. Fue sorprendente la rapidez con que la doctora Prance y él volvieron a reanudar su amistad—. Me imagino que sabrá usted que la señorita Tarrant y la señorita Chancellor están aquí —continuó.

—Sí, supongo que lo sé. Soy huésped de la señorita Chancellor —añadió la pequeña mujer.

—¿De verdad? ¡Me alegra muchísimo saberlo! —exclamó Ransom, sintiendo que podía tener un aliado en territorio enemigo—. Entonces podrá usted informarme de dónde viven.

—Sí, creo que le puedo mostrar la casa a pesar de la oscuridad. Se la mostraré ahora, si le parece bien.

—Me alegrará verla, aunque no tengo la seguridad de presentarme ante ella de inmediato. Debo hacer primero un pequeño reconocimiento. Por eso me siento tan feliz de haberla encontrado. Me parece que es verdaderamente una maravilla que se acuerde usted de mí.

La doctora Prance no rechazó ese cumplido, pero poco después observó:

—No lo he olvidado del todo porque he oído hablar de usted en algunas ocasiones a la señorita Birdseye.

—La vi esta primavera. Espero que se encuentre sana y feliz.

—Ella es siempre feliz, pero no se puede decir que esté bien de salud. Se encuentra muy débil; está decayendo rápidamente.

—Lo siento mucho.

—También ella es huésped de la señorita Chancellor —observó la doctora Prance, después de una pausa que era una ilustración del aspecto que tenía de pensar que ciertas cosas no implicaban por fuerza otras.

—¡Vamos, mi prima ha reunido en torno a ella a todas las mujeres distinguidas de Boston! —exclamó Ransom.

—¿Es prima suya la señorita Chancellor? No se parecen ustedes demasiado. La señorita Birdseye ha venido a disfrutar del aire del campo y yo he venido para ver si podía ayudarla a obtener algún beneficio. No le serviría de mucho si la dejáramos abandonada a sus propias fuerzas. La señorita Birdseye tiene una gran personalidad pero es muy poco escrupulosa en lo referente a la higiene.

Por lo visto la doctora Prance se sentía cada vez más dispuesta a hablar. Ransom se sintió complacido por ese hecho y le dijo que esperaba que también ella disfrutara de los beneficios del aire del campo; temía que su profesión la absorbiera demasiado en Boston, a lo que ella respondió:

—Bueno, precisamente hacía ahora un poco de ejercicio. Me imagino que usted no tiene idea de lo que significa vivir con otras tres mujeres en una casita de madera.

Ransom recordó lo mucho que le había gustado ya antes la doctora, y sintió que nuevamente le volvería a gustar. Deseaba manifestarle su buena disposición hacia ella; y le hubiera gustado mucho poder tomarse la libertad de ofrecerle un cigarro. No sabía qué ofrecerle o qué hacer, a menos que la invitara a sentarse junto a él en una valla.

Podía imaginarse perfectamente la situación imperante en la pequeña casa de madera y al instante sintió simpatía por los sentimientos que habían impulsado a la doctora Prance a abandonar aquel círculo y salir a vagar bajo las constelaciones, cuyos nombres con toda seguridad conocería. Le pidió permiso para acompañarla en su paseo pero ella le dijo que no continuaría caminando en aquella dirección; estaba a punto de volver a casa. Ransom la acompañó hacia el pueblo, y al final comenzó a descubrir cierta regularidad, señales de vida humana, casas diseminadas con cierto orden. La carretera serpenteaba entre ellas con una especie de acogedora sinuosidad, y había también calles trazadas y una farola de aceite en una esquina, y aquí y allá el pequeño cartel de una tienda cerrada, con una indiscutible caligrafía pueblerina. Algunas de las ventanas de las casas estaban iluminadas, y la doctora Prance le mencionó a su acompañante los nombres de varios de los habitantes de la población, que parecían ir todos acompañados del título de capitán. Eran navegantes retirados; aquel era precisamente un nido de aquellos hombres; vio a través de las puertas abiertas a dos o tres de ellos moviéndose de un lado a otro, como si fueran conscientes de su incapacidad de sentarse en un sitio, y estuvieran recordando las noches transcurridas en mares lejanos cuando ni siquiera se les pasaba por la mente la idea del retiro. Marmion se hacía llamar ciudad, pero se había reducido mucho desde que había declinado la construcción naval; sus astilleros habían producido un buen número de veleros al año, en los días de su esplendor, antes de la guerra. Existían todavía los astilleros, donde era posible encontrar viejos cuchillos, viejos clavos y maderos; pero ahora estaban cubiertos de hierba, y el agua llegaba hasta los muelles sin encontrar el menor obstáculo. Estaban situados en una especie de brazo de mar; no en el mar verdadero, sino en aguas muy tranquilas, como las de un río. Para algunas personas aquel lugar resultaba muy atractivo. La doctora Prance no le dijo que el lugar fuera pintoresco, o extraño, o fantástico; pero él podía comprender que eso era lo que quería decir cuando comentó que se estaba desmoronando lentamente. Aun bajo el manto de la noche, Ransom tuvo la impresión de que aquel lugar había auspiciado una vida más animada, de que había conocido mejores días. La doctora Prance no hizo ningún comentario con la intención de obtener de él un relato de los motivos que lo habían hecho emprender el viaje a Marmion; no le preguntó ni cuándo había llegado ni el tiempo que proyectaba

permanecer allí. La alusión de Ransom a su parentesco con la señorita Chancellor la hubiera podido tomar como un motivo; sin embargo, por otra parte, ella debía haberse extrañado, si la intención de Ransom al hacer ese viaje era visitar a las jóvenes de Charles Street, que no se hubiera dado mayor prisa en presentarse ante ellas. Por lo visto la doctora Prance no se dedicaba a analizar ese tipo de situaciones. Si Ransom se hubiera quejado de un dolor en la garganta ella le hubiera preguntado con precisión los síntomas; pero era incapaz de hacer una pregunta que hiciera referencia a la vida social. Sin embargo continuaron caminando cordialmente por la calle principal de la pequeña población, oscurecida en algunos lugares por la sombra de inmensos olmos que formaban una espesa mancha negra sobre sus cabezas. Había un olor salino en el aire, como si estuvieran cerca del mar; la doctora Prance dijo que la casa de Olive se hallaba en el otro extremo.

—Consideraré como una gentileza de su parte si, por esta noche, no menciona usted que nos hemos encontrado —le pidió Ransom al poco rato. Había cambiado de opinión sobre el anuncio de su presencia en el lugar.

—Muy bien, no lo haré —respondió su compañera, como si no necesitara ninguna advertencia sobre la posibilidad de hacer declaraciones superfluas.

—Quiero que mi llegada constituya mañana una pequeña sorpresa. Será un gran placer para mí ver a la señorita Birdseye —continuó con bastante hipocresía, como si aquella fuera, en el fondo, la razón por la que hubiera hecho el viaje a Marmion.

La doctora Prance no manifestó ninguna opinión sobre este anuncio; solo dijo, después de dudar un poco:

—Bien, me parece que a la vieja señorita le interesará saber que está usted aquí.

—No me cabe duda de que es capaz de llegar hasta ese grado su filantropía.

—Mire, ella siente simpatía por todo el mundo, pero desde luego prefiere a las personas de su propio bando. Lo considera a usted casi como una adquisición.

Ransom no podía sino sentirse halagado al saber que había sido tema de conversación, como aquello implicaba, en el pequeño círculo de la señorita Chancellor; pero por el momento se sentía perdido, pues no sabía qué había hecho para complacer al miembro más anciano de aquel grupo.

—Espero que me considere una adquisición después de permanecer aquí algunos días —dijo, y se echó a reír.

—Bueno, ella cree que usted es uno de los conversos más importantes hasta este momento —respondió la doctora Prance en un tono neutro, como si no le interesara explicar el porqué de aquella aseveración.

—¿Un converso… yo? ¿Quiere usted decir de la señorita Tarrant? —Había recordado, en efecto, que cuando se había separado de la señorita Birdseye después de su encuentro en Boston, ella había consentido en su petición de mantener el secreto (lo que al principio le había chocado como si estuviera perpetrando un sacrilegio) en la convicción de que Verena lo conduciría al redil. Él se preguntó si acaso la joven le había dicho a su anciana amiga que había triunfado en esa misión. Le parecía algo improbable; pero no le importaba demasiado, así que dijo alegremente—: Bueno, puedo fácilmente dejarla creer que lo soy.

Era evidente que a la doctora Prance no le resultaba más fácil que a su venerable paciente suscribir una mentira; pero se atrevió a responder:

—Espero que no le dejará creer que está en el mismo sitio en que se hallaba el día en que conversé con usted. Me pude dar muy bien cuenta de dónde estaba usted.

—Estaba más o menos en el mismo sitio que usted, ¿no es así?

—¡Ay! —dijo la doctora Prance, emitiendo un pequeño suspiro—. Temo que yo haya retrocedido.

Su suspiro le dijo muchas cosas; parecía una protesta sutil y controlada contra la atmósfera que respiraba en casa de la señorita Chancellor, de la que tenía la fortuna de disfrutar en esos días; y el modo en que vagabundeaba por el campo, en medio de la oscuridad, como si le molestara ocupar su lugar allí, completó la impresión de Basil sobre el hecho de que la pequeña doctora seguía una línea de conducta individual.

—Eso, al menos, debe contrariar mucho a la señorita Birdseye —dijo con tono de reproche.

—No mucho, debido a que no soy importante. Ellas consideran que las mujeres son iguales a los hombres; pero se sienten mucho más contentas cuando un hombre se adhiere a su causa que cuando lo hace una mujer.

Ransom elogió a la doctora Prance por la lucidez de su mente, y luego dijo:

—¿Está realmente enferma la señorita Birdseye? ¿Es muy precaria su salud?

—Bueno es una mujer muy anciana, y muy… muy delicada —respondió la doctora Prance, dudando un instante antes de hallar el adjetivo—. En esas circunstancias una persona puede perecer.

—Debemos alimentar la antorcha —dijo Ransom—. Con placer tomaré mi turno para cuidar la llama sagrada.

—Será una lástima si no vive para asistir al gran esfuerzo de la señorita Tarrant —añadió la doctora.

—¿De la señorita Tarrant? ¿De qué se trata?

—Bueno, es lo que más les interesa ahora allí. —Y la doctora Prance indicó vagamente, con un movimiento de cabeza, una pequeña casa blanca, muy alejada de las otras, que se erguía a la izquierda y cuya parte posterior daba al mar, a muy poca distancia de la carretera. Mostraba mayores señales de animación que las otras casas; varias ventanas, especialmente las de la planta baja, estaban abiertas y un gran rayo de luz se proyectaba sobre la acera cubierta de césped. Ransom, en su determinación de mantener la mayor discreción, hizo callar a su compañera, quien añadió en ese momento, con una risa breve y sofocada—: Ya se podrá dar usted cuenta por los preparativos.

Basil Ransom permaneció en silencio, tratando de adivinar a qué aludía la doctora y, después de un instante, un sonido le llegó al oído… un sonido que ya conocía bien, y que llevaba las palabras de Verena, en amplios períodos y cadencias, al exterior, a la tranquilidad de esa noche de agosto.

—¡Cielos, qué hermosa voz! —exclamó involuntariamente.

La mirada de la doctora Prance resplandeció al observarlo durante un momento, humorísticamente.

—¡Tal vez la señorita Birdseye esté en lo cierto! —Luego, al no obtener ninguna respuesta, pues Basil Ransom no hacía sino escuchar aquellas inflexiones vocales que salían de la casa, añadió—: Está ensayando su discurso.

—¿Su discurso? ¿Va a pronunciar uno aquí?

—No, lo hará en Boston tan pronto como regresen. Va a hablar en el Music Hall.

La atención de Ransom se posó entonces en su compañera.

—¿Se refería usted a esto cuando hablaba de su gran esfuerzo?

—Así lo llaman ellas. Todas las noches ensaya de esa manera. Lee trozos de su discurso en voz alta a la señorita Chancellor y a la señorita Birdseye.

—¿Y esos son los momentos que elige usted para sus paseos nocturnos? —preguntó Ransom sonriendo.

—Sí, son los momentos en que la vieja señorita tiene menos necesidad de mí; se halla demasiado absorta.

La doctora Prance se refería siempre a hechos; ya Ransom lo había advertido; y algunos de esos hechos eran muy interesantes.

—¿El Music Hall? ¿No es ese el gran edificio de Boston? —preguntó.

—Sí, es el más grande que existe en Boston; es muy amplio, pero no tanto como las ideas de la señorita Chancellor —añadió la doctora Prance—. Lo ha elegido para presentar a la señorita Tarrant ante el gran público, nunca antes ha hecho una aparición así en Boston… a tan gran escala. Espera que su presentación sea algo sensacional. Será una gran noche y la están preparando. Consideran que aquel será su verdadero comienzo.

—¿Y estos son los preparativos? —preguntó Ransom.

—Sí; como le dije, es lo que más les interesa.

Ransom escuchaba, y mientras escuchaba meditaba. Había considerado posible que los principios de Verena se hubieran resquebrajado ante la declaración de fe que él había hecho en Nueva York; pero al parecer no era así. Durante unos minutos tanto él como la doctora Prance permanecieron en silencio.

—No escucha usted las palabras —comentó la doctora Prance, con una sonrisa que, en la oscuridad, parecía mefistofélica.

—Oh, ya conozco las palabras —exclamó el joven con una especie de gruñido mientras le tendía la mano para despedirse.

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Cierta prudencia había determinado que Ransom pospusiera su visita hasta la mañana siguiente; pensó que tal vez a esas horas fuera posible ver a Verena a solas, mientras que en la noche era seguro que las dos jóvenes estuvieran sentadas una cerca de la otra. Sin embargo, cuando despertó al día siguiente no tuvo la menor vacilación para llevar a cabo sus propósitos. No sabía nada sobre el recibimiento que le esperaba pero emprendió el camino a la casita que la noche anterior le había mostrado la doctora Prance, con el paso seguro de quien es consciente de sus propias intenciones más que de los posibles obstáculos. Mientras caminaba se hizo la reflexión de que ver por primera vez un lugar en la noche es como leer a un autor extranjero en una traducción. En aquel momento —eran cerca de las once— sintió que estaba en contacto con el original. La pequeña ciudad diseminada un poco aquí y allá se extendía a lo largo de la costa, sobre una bahía azul; a un lado había una playa baja y boscosa, con una franja de arena blanca bañada por el agua. La estrecha bahía hacía recordar un cuadro que pareciera a la vez brillante y oscuro… un mar de verano brillante y reluciente, y un círculo de costa caliginosa y delicada bajo el sol de agosto. Ransom definía aquella localidad como una ciudad porque así la había llamado la doctora Prance; pero se trataba de un lugar donde era posible respirar el olor de heno por las calles y donde se podían recoger moras en la plaza principal. Las casas se miraban unas a otras a través de los prados… casas bajas, y amplias, de madera, con rostros secos y arrugados y ojos estrechos de pequeños paneles con los marcos desvencijados. Los pequeños jardines frente a la puerta principal estaban cubiertos de flores pasadas de moda, amarillas sobre todo; y en la parte que daba hacia el mar los campos subían en una suave pendiente, y en los bosques, entre los que aquellas casas se perdían, solo era

posible ver algunos tejados. Las cofias y delantales no constituían un elemento necesario para el servicio doméstico en Marmion, y la sirvienta que recibía al visitante en la puerta era una criatura más deseada que poseída en la realidad, de modo que Basil Ransom encontró la puerta de entrada de casa de la señorita Chancellor abierta de par en par (como la había visto la noche anterior) y desprovista de un timbre o de una campanilla. Desde el lugar en que se encontraba en el pórtico podía ver perfectamente la pequeña sala al lado izquierdo del vestíbulo; podía abarcar con una sola mirada hasta las ventanas de la parte posterior; las paredes estaban decoradas con fotografías de obras de arte extranjeras, y la sala estaba enriquecida con un piano y algunos de esos raros objetos de ornato que las mujeres se ingenian para poner en las casas que alquilan por unas cuantas semanas. Verena le dijo algún tiempo después que Olive había tomado la casa ya amueblada, pero que eran tan pocas las sillas, las mesas y las camas, que aquel pequeño grupo acostumbraba a sentarse o tenderse por turnos. No faltaban las obras de George Eliot y dos fotografías de la Madonna de la Capilla Sixtina. Ransom golpeó la puerta con la punta del bastón pero nadie salió a recibirlo; así que entró en la sala, donde pudo observar que su prima tenía tantos libros en alemán como siempre diseminados por todas partes. Por un momento se sumió en la lectura de uno de ellos, como era su costumbre, y entonces recordó que no era a eso a lo que había ido y que mientras esperaba en la puerta había visto, a través de otra puerta que se abría al lado opuesto del vestíbulo, parte de una terraza situada en el costado posterior de la casa. Pensando que las damas podían estar reunidas allí, a la sombra, hizo a un lado la cortina de muselina y advirtió que todas las ventajas de la residencia veraniega de la señorita Chancellor se concentraban allí. Había, en efecto, una terraza sombreada por una amplia pérgola, formada por las ramas de una vieja parra. Más allá de la pérgola había un pequeño jardín abandonado, y aún más allá se extendía una amplia zona boscosa donde había algunas pilas de leños, y que más tarde supo que eran reliquias de la época de los astilleros de que había hablado la doctora Prance. A lo lejos se hallaba el estuario estupendo, semejante a un lago, que ya había admirado. Sus ojos no se posaron en aquel paisaje distante, sino que fueron atraídos de inmediato por una figura sentada bajo la pérgola, donde los rayos solares se filtraban, entre los intersticios de la vid y caían sobre una alfombra de vivos colores. El suelo de aquella

tosca terraza era tan bajo que prácticamente no había diferencia con el de la casa. Al instante Ransom reconoció a la señorita Birdseye, a pesar de que solo podía verla de espaldas. Estaba sola e inmóvil (tenía en el regazo un periódico, pero su actitud no era la de una persona que estuviera leyendo) frente a la brillante bahía. Podía estar dormida, así que Ransom moderó el paso de sus largas piernas para atravesar el corredor hasta llegar a ella. Aquella precaución fue su única delicadeza. Cruzó la terraza y se detuvo frente a ella, quien sin embargo no pareció advertir su presencia. Estaba visiblemente adormilada, o por lo menos eso era lo que se podía suponer, pues se escondía bajo un viejo sombrero de paja descolorido, que le ocultaba la parte superior de la cara. A su lado había dos o tres sillas vacías, y una mesa con media docena de libros y revistas, junto a un vaso con un líquido incoloro sobre el cual se apoyaba una cucharilla. Ransom se propuso no perturbar su reposo y se sentó en una silla esperando que pudiera advertir su presencia. Pensó que el jardín posterior de la señorita Chancellor era un lugar delicioso, y sus sentidos fatigados se refrescaron con la brisa, ese vientecillo vago y perezoso del verano—, que agitaba las hojas de parra sobre su cabeza. Las playas caliginosas de la otra parte de la bahía, que tenía tonalidades más delicadas que las calles de Nueva York (parecían inmersas en una nube plateada, una especie de luminosidad que solo puede verse durante el verano), le sugerían una especie de tierra soñada, un paisaje como solo era posible ver en los cuadros. Basil Ransom no había visto demasiados cuadros, no los había en Mississippi, pero tenía a veces la visión de algo que podía ser más refinado que el mundo real, y el lugar donde se encontraba en aquel momento le fascinaba tanto que le parecía estar frente a una gran obra de arte. Era incapaz de ver, como ya he dicho, si la señorita Birdseye estaba contemplando el panorama con los ojos abiertos o si, ayudada de su fantasía (que no era escasa), lo hacía a través de sus ojos cerrados, cansados, deslumbrados. Mientras los minutos pasaban y Ransom permanecía sentado a su lado, le llegó a parecer la encarnación de un reposo bien merecido, de un retiro humilde y paciente. Al final de sus largas jornadas de trabajo merecía estar allí disfrutando de la vaga prefiguración del apacible río y de las brillantes playas del paraíso donde su vida carente de egoísmo la cualificaba perfectamente para entrar y que, por lo visto, muy pronto se abriría ante ella. Después de un rato dijo con placidez, sin volverse hacia él:

—Me imagino que ya es hora de volver a tomar mi medicina. Parece que esta vez la doctora ha dado con el remedio indicado, ¿no le parece?

—¿Se refiere usted al contenido de ese vaso? Será para mí un gran placer poder dárselo; dígame solo qué cantidad debe tomar.

Y Basil Ransom se levantó en ese momento y cogió el vaso que estaba sobre la mesa.

Al escuchar aquella voz la señorita Birdseye se echó hacia atrás el sombrero de paja con un movimiento que le era familiar, y girando ligeramente su arropada figura (aún en agosto sentía frío y se abrigaba cada vez que salía a sentarse en la terraza), le dirigió al joven una mirada pensativa y de ninguna manera sorprendida.

—¿Una cucharada… dos? —dijo Ransom agitando el vaso con una sonrisa.

—Me parece que esta vez debo tomar dos.

—Era natural que la doctora Prance descubriera al fin el medicamento preciso —dijo Ransom mientras le administraba la medicina; el movimiento con el cual ella estiró el cuello para tomarla hizo que pareciera doblemente infantil.

Basil volvió a colocar el vaso en su sitio y ella se dejó caer en la misma posición que tenía antes; parecía pensar en algo. Al fin, después de un momento, comentó:

—Es un remedio homeopático.

—No me cabe de eso la menor duda; supongo que no tomaría usted medicinas de otra clase.

—Bueno, ya todo el mundo admite hoy día que es el sistema verdadero.

Ransom se acercó a su silla; se colocó en un sitio desde donde ella lo pudiera ver mejor.

—Es una gran cosa conocer el sistema verdadero —dijo inclinándose hacia ella en un tono amistoso—. Y tengo la seguridad de que todo lo que usted hace se ajusta a la verdad. —Raramente era hipócrita, pero cuando lo era superaba cualquier medida.

—No sé si alguien tiene el derecho de decir eso con tanta seguridad. Pensé que quien estaba aquí era Verena —añadió después, observándolo de nuevo con su mirada suave e intencionada.

—Estaba esperando a que me reconociera; por supuesto no podía usted saber que yo estaba aquí… llegué anoche.

—Me alegra que esta vez sí se haya decidido a visitar a Olive.

—¿Se acuerda usted todavía de que no lo hice la última vez que nos vimos?

—Me pidió usted que no le mencionara nuestro encuentro; me acuerdo sobre todo de eso.

—¿Y no recuerda usted qué era lo que me proponía yo hacer? Quería ir a Cambridge a visitar a la señorita Tarrant. Gracias a la información que usted tan amablemente me proporcionó pude lograrlo.

—Sí, ella me hizo una pequeña descripción de su visita —dijo la señorita Birdseye con una sonrisa y un extraño sonido en la garganta, una especie de alusión personal y privada a lo que debía de constituir una risa, y cuyo significado exacto nunca logró captar Ransom, aunque durante mucho tiempo conservó un recuerdo afectuoso de las maneras de la anciana en aquella ocasión.

—No sé si a ella le agradó, pero para mí constituyó un placer inmenso, tan grande que, como usted ve, he venido otra vez a visitarla.

—¿Puedo entonces creer que lo ha impresionado?

—¡Me ha impresionado de una manera tremenda! —dijo Ransom, y se echó a reír.

—Bueno, es usted una gran adquisición —replicó la señorita Birdseye—. ¿Y esta vez su visita incluye también a la señorita Chancellor?

—Todo dependerá de que ella desee recibirme.

—Si sabe que se ha convencido, eso ayudará mucho —dijo la señorita Birdseye un poco pensativa, como si aun para su mente sencilla le resultara evidente que las relaciones con la señorita Chancellor podían ser algo muy complicado—. Pero ahora no podrá recibirlo, ¿no es cierto?, porque no está en casa. Ha ido al correo a recoger la correspondencia de Boston; recibe tantas cartas que ha llevado consigo a Verena para que la ayude a traerlas. Una de ellas deseaba quedarse a hacerme compañía, porque la doctora Prance ha salido de pesca, pero les dije que era perfectamente capaz de permanecer sola durante unos siete minutos. Sé lo mucho que les gusta estar juntas; parece como si ninguna de ellas pudiera vivir sin la otra. Por eso se decidieron a venir a este lugar, porque es tranquilo, y no hay peligro de que nadie venga a perturbarlas. Por eso resulta una calamidad que haya venido yo a arruinar sus planes.

—Temo que sea yo quien se los arruine, señorita Birdseye.

—¡Oh, bueno, un caballero! —murmuró vagamente la anciana.

—Sí, ¿qué otra cosa se podía esperar de un caballero? Con toda seguridad les arruinaré sus planes si me es posible.

—Lo mejor sería que saliera usted a pescar con la doctora Prance —dijo la señorita Birdseye, que mostraba estar muy lejos de concebir lo que de siniestro podía haber en la declaración de Ransom.

—No me parece nada desdeñable la idea. Los días aquí deben de hacerse muy largos, deben de resultar interminables. ¿Está aquí la doctora con usted? —preguntó el joven.

—Sí, la señorita Chancellor nos invitó a ambas; es una mujer muy amable. No es una filántropa puramente teórica, sino que sabe ocuparse de los detalles —dijo la señorita Birdseye, refiriéndose a su persona como si ella misma fuera uno de esos detalles—. De cualquier manera no éramos necesarias en Boston, precisamente en agosto.

—Y aquí puede usted sentarse y disfrutar del buen aire y contemplar el panorama —comentó el joven, preguntándose cuándo regresarían del correo las dos mensajeras, cuyos siete minutos habían expirado hacía largo rato.

—Sí, disfruto de todo lo que hay en este pequeño y antiguo lugar; nunca me hubiera imaginado que podía satisfacerme tanto la ociosidad. Es algo muy diferente a toda mi actividad de otros tiempos. Pero de cualquier modo no me parece que haya demasiados problemas ni males que resolver aquí; y si los hubiera ahí están las señoritas Chancellor y Tarrant para ocuparse de ellos. Creo que prefieren que yo permanezca de brazos cruzados. Además, cuando también del Sur comienzan a afluir mentes generosas y útiles… —continuó la señorita Birdseye, mirándolo desde abajo de la copa blanda y descolorida de su sombrero con una indulgencia que completaba la idea en el sentido más benévolo que él pudiera elegir.

Él sintió en ese momento que estaba desempeñando un papel deshonesto; se esperaba de él que no destruyera el optimismo de la anciana. Esto debía costarle en los días siguientes una gran dosis de disimulo, pero en ese momento fue salvado de cualquier explotación mayor de la ingenuidad de la señorita Birdseye por ciertos ruidos que le previnieron de que debía mantener su inteligencia intacta para resolver problemas más urgentes. Oyó voces en el vestíbulo, voces que conocía, que se acercaron tan

rápidamente que antes de que pudiera ponerse de pie una de las interlocutoras había entrado con una exclamación:

—¡Querida señorita Birdseye, tengo aquí siete cartas para usted!

El sonido de aquellas palabras se apagó, casi en el mismo momento en que eran pronunciadas, y Basil Ransom al levantarse vio a Olive Chancellor parada allí, con el paquete de cartas en la mano. Por un momento ella lo contempló con indecible horror. Todo el dominio de sí misma pareció abandonarle. No había ninguna expresión en su rostro fuera de la de desmayo, tanto que él consideró que no tenía nada que decirle, nada que pudiera mitigar el hecho odioso de hallarse ahí. Lo único que podía hacer en esa ocasión era dejarle adivinar que no le sería fácil desembarazarse de él. Inmediatamente, para hacer menos violenta la situación, tendió una mano para tomar las cartas dirigidas a la señorita Birdseye y la prueba de que Olive se sentía totalmente débil y atemorizada fue que se las entregó. Ransom le pasó la correspondencia a la vieja señorita precisamente en el momento en que Verena aparecía en el umbral de la puerta. Tan pronto como vio a Basil Ransom su rostro se tiñó de un color carmesí; pero, a diferencia de Olive, no perdió el uso de la palabra.

—¡Pero si es el señor Ransom! —exclamó—. ¿De qué parte del mundo ha escapado usted?

Mientras tanto la señorita Birdseye, pretendiendo leer sus cartas, simuló no advertir que el encuentro entre Olive y su visitante había tenido las características de una riña sorda.

Fue Verena quien suavizó la situación; su alegre exclamación surgió de sus labios con tanta naturalidad como si no tuviera ningún motivo para sentirse incómoda. No mostraba ninguna confusión, a pesar del rubor que teñía sus mejillas, lo que tal vez podía explicarse por la costumbre de hablar en público. Ransom le sonrió cuando ella se acercó, pero se dirigió primero a Olive, que había apartado la mirada de él y la tenía fija en el mar azul como si se preguntara qué era lo que iba a suceder.

—Estoy seguro de que se ha sorprendido mucho al verme aquí; pero espero poder convencerla de que no debe considerarme en absoluto como a un intruso. Encontré abierta la puerta de la casa y entré, y la señorita Birdseye pareció pensar que debía quedarme. Señorita Birdseye, me pongo bajo su protección; invoco su asilo —

prosiguió el joven—. ¡Adópteme, responda por mí, cúbrame bajo el manto de su caridad!

La señorita Birdseye levantó la mirada de las cartas, como si no comprendiera bien lo que le estaban diciendo. Luego dirigió la mirada hacia Olive y Verena y dijo:

—¿No creen ustedes que haya sitio para todos? Cuando recuerdo las cosas que he visto en el Sur me parece un gran triunfo tener al señor Ransom aquí con nosotras.

Olive evidentemente no logró entender el sentido de aquellas palabras y Verena exclamó con cierta ansiedad:

—Por supuesto se enteró usted de dónde estábamos gracias a mi carta. La que le escribí antes de que viniéramos a este lugar, Olive —continuó—, ¿recuerdas que te la mostré?

Ante la mención de aquel acto de sumisión de parte de su amiga, Olive pareció reponerse; le dirigió a Verena una extraña mirada y luego le dijo a Basil que no veía por qué tenía que dar tantas explicaciones por ir a visitarlas; era un derecho que todo el mundo tenía. El lugar era realmente encantador, era imposible no disfrutar de él. Pero luego añadió:

—Pero para usted tendrá un defecto: las tres cuartas partes de los veraneantes son mujeres.

Este comentario de parte de la señorita Chancellor, tan inesperado, tan incongruente, pronunciado con labios blanquecinos y ojos helados, le impresionó a Ransom a tal grado por su extrañeza que no pudo resistir cambiar una mirada de asombro con Verena, quien, de haber tenido la oportunidad, le hubiera explicado el fenómeno. Olive se había recuperado, recordó que estaba a salvo, que su compañera en Nueva York había repudiado y denunciado a su perseguidor; y para probarse a sí misma su sentimiento de seguridad, así como para demostrarle sutilmente a Verena que después de lo que había pasado, no tenía temores, sintió que cierto tono ligeramente burlón podía resultar efectivo.

—¡Ay, señorita Chancellor no pretenda creer que amo tan poco a su sexo, cuando sabe que lo que en realidad me reprocho es amarlo demasiado! —Ransom no era un individuo descarado ni impúdico; en realidad era un hombre muy modesto; pero sabía que cualquier cosa que dijera o hiciera estaba condenada, a partir de ese momento, a

parecer impúdica, y pensó en el mismo instante que si debía sufrir el deshonor de que lo consideraran descarado debía también aprovechar las ventajas que ello comportaba. En realidad no le importaba nada cómo pudiera ser juzgado ni a quién pudiera ofender; el fin por el que había hecho el viaje neutralizaba todas esas minucias, y estaba tan compenetrado con él que eso lo mantenía firme, lo equilibraba y le daba una seguridad en sí mismo que fácilmente podía confundirse con una fría reserva hacia los demás—. Este lugar me hará bien —continuó—; hace más de dos años que no tomo vacaciones; no hubiera podido resistir sin ellas un día más. Estaba extenuado. Hubiera debido escribirle para advertirle de mi llegada, pero me decidí pocas horas antes de mi salida. Pensé que precisamente este era el lugar que deseaba; recordé lo que la señorita Tarrant me dijo en su carta, que era un lugar donde la gente podía tenderse en el prado y usar su vieja ropa. Nada me gusta tanto como tirarme en el prado y todos mis trajes son viejos. Espero poder quedarme aquí unas tres o cuatro semanas.

Olive lo escuchó hasta el final; permaneció sin hacer el más mínimo movimiento, y luego, sin una palabra ni una mirada se precipitó hacia el interior de la casa. Ransom vio que la señorita Birdseye estaba inmersa en sus cartas, así que se dirigió hacia Verena y se detuvo frente a ella, mirándola fijamente a los ojos. Ya no sonreía como había hecho poco antes mientras hablaba con Olive.

—¿Podría venir conmigo —le dijo— a algún lugar apartado, donde pueda hablar a solas con usted?

—¿Por qué ha hecho esto? ¡No tenía usted derecho a venir! —Verena parecía todavía ruborizada, pero Ransom advirtió que parte de aquel color debía atribuirse al contacto con el sol.

—He venido porque era necesario… porque tengo algo muy importante que decirle. Muchas cosas.

—¿Las mismas que me dijo en Nueva York? No quiero volver a escucharlas… ¡eran horribles!

—No, no son las mismas… son distintas. Quiero que venga usted conmigo… fuera de aquí.

—¡Usted siempre quiere que yo salga! Aquí no es necesario salir; ya estamos fuera, lo más fuera que pueda ser posible.

Verena se rió; trataba de no darle importancia a lo que ocurría, sentía algo grave en la atmósfera.

—Venga conmigo al jardín, iremos hasta el mar, donde podremos hablar. He venido solo para eso y no para lo que le dije a la señorita Olive.

Había bajado la voz por temor a que Olive pudiera escucharlo, y había algo extrañamente grave, algo en realidad solemne, en su tono. Verena miró a su alrededor, al espléndido día de verano, a la figura informe envuelta en mantas de la señorita Birdseye, que sostenía las cartas bajo el sombrero.

—¡Señor Ransom! —exclamó con toda naturalidad; y cuando sus ojos volvieron a encontrarse, los de la joven mostraban un par de lágrimas.

—No es para hacerla sufrir, se lo digo seriamente. No quiero decir nada que resulte ofensivo para usted. ¿Cómo podría yo querer herirla cuando siento lo que siento por usted? —continuó con una fuerza contenida.

Ella no respondió nada, pero toda su cara expresaba una súplica de que no insistiera, que la dejara tranquila, y cuando esa mirada se hizo más intensa, un rápido sentimiento de exaltación y de triunfo comenzó a anidar en el corazón del joven, pues aquella mirada le decía precisamente lo que quería saber. Le decía que tenía miedo de él, que había perdido la seguridad en sí misma, que el modo como él había interpretado su naturaleza era el correcto (era una criatura tremendamente indefensa, había nacido para amar, había sido creada para él) y que el hecho de que él llegara hasta donde se proponía llegar era solo cuestión de tiempo. Ese feliz descubrimiento lo llevó a ser extraordinariamente tierno con ella; se esforzó por transmitirle todas las seguridades de lo que decía en su sonrisa; su voz se convirtió en un murmullo cuando le dijo:

—Concédame solo diez minutos; no me reciba dándome la espalda. Es mi primer día de vacaciones, mi primer pobre día de vacaciones; no me lo arruine.

Tres minutos más tarde, cuando la señorita Birdseye levantó la mirada de una de sus cartas, los vio caminar juntos por el jardín y pasar por una abertura que había en la vieja empalizada que lo circundaba. Los vio llegar al viejo astillero abandonado que constituía ya solo una vaga serie de maderos junto al mar. Los vio caminar por el borde de la bahía y detenerse allí, recibiendo en la cara la fresca brisa marina. Los observó durante un buen rato mientras su corazón se conmovía al ver al altivo joven sureño

cautivado por una hija de Nueva Inglaterra, educada en la escuela correcta, que le impondría firmemente sus opiniones. Al considerar los muchos prejuicios de que debían de haberle imbuido, era notable el modo en que se comportaba ese joven; aun a aquella distancia la señorita Birdseye pudo ver que había algo realmente humilde en la manera en que él invitaba a Verena Tarrant a sentarse sobre una pila de tablones ennegrecidos por el tiempo, el único mobiliario del lugar, y algo, tal vez una expresión de triunfo en los ademanes de ella, al negarse a aceptar aquel ofrecimiento y permanecer en pie donde mejor le parecía, alejándose un poco de él con cierto orgullo. La señorita Birdseye podía ver todo eso, pero no podía escuchar lo que decían, así que no supo qué había sido lo que obligó a Verena a volverse rápidamente hacia él, como por efecto de algo dicho por el joven. Si lo hubiera sabido tal vez la frase de Ransom le habría parecido menos extraña, dadas las circunstancias en que aquellos dos jóvenes se encontraban, de lo que le podrá parecer al lector.

—Han aceptado uno de mis artículos; creo que se trata del mejor. —Aquellas fueron las primeras palabras que salieron de los labios de Basil Ransom después de que la pareja se alejara todo lo que fue posible alejarse (en aquella dirección) de la casa.

—¿Lo van a imprimir…? ¿Cuándo aparecerá? —Verena hizo aquella pregunta instantáneamente; surgió de sus labios con una vehemencia que desmentía completamente aquel aire de mantenerse a distancia que había intentado adoptar unos minutos antes.

En esa ocasión Basil no le dijo, como lo había hecho en Nueva York durante el paseo por el parque cuando ella había expresado la inconsecuente esperanza de que cambiara su suerte y dejara de ser un escritor rechazado, en fin, no volvió a decirle que era una criatura deliciosa; solo se permitió (como si el rechazo de ella fuera la cosa más natural) explicarle todo lo que pudo, para que ella pudiera conocerlo mejor y viera hasta qué grado podía confiar en él.

—Esa precisamente es la razón por la que he hecho este viaje. Ese artículo es la cosa más importante que he escrito; había decidido continuar insistiendo o desistir según la suerte que corriera, es decir si lograba publicarlo o no. Hace unos días recibí una carta del director de la *Rational Review* en que me decía que se sentiría feliz de poder publicarlo, que lo consideraba un ensayo notable y que esperaba seguir contando

con mi colaboración. Por supuesto que seguirá contando con mi colaboración, de eso puede estar seguro. Contenía muchas de las opiniones que ya le he expuesto y otras más. Realmente creo que despertaré cierto interés. De cualquier manera el simple hecho de que sea publicado constituye una nueva etapa en mi vida. A usted tal vez esto le parecerá lamentable, a usted que expresa en público sus opiniones, que ha tenido contacto con el público en estos últimos años y que ha paladeado el triunfo; pero para mí es algo simplemente maravilloso. Me hace sentir que podré llegar a hacer algo, ha cambiado completamente mis ideas sobre mi porvenir. He estado construyendo castillos en el aire, y la he colocado a usted en el más hermoso y grande de todos. Para mí todo esto significa un gran cambio y es precisamente, como le he dicho, la razón por la que he venido.

Verena no perdió una palabra de aquella declaración cortés, conciliadora y explícita; estaba muy sorprendida, y tan pronto como Ransom dejó de hablar le preguntó:

—Entonces ¿no creía usted antes en su porvenir?

Por su tono pudo advertir lo poco que ella había sospechado que hubiera podido sentirse desalentado, qué poco había dudado en que el triunfo futuro se hallaba en su camino. Era el tributo más dulce que él había recibido hasta aquel momento sobre su talento; la carta del director de la *Rational Review* no era nada en comparación con eso.

—No, me sentía muy descorazonado, ni siquiera me sentía seguro de que pudiera haber sitio para mí en este mundo.

—¡Cielos! —dijo Verena Tarrant.

Un cuarto de hora más tarde, la señorita Birdseye, que había vuelto a sus cartas (mantenía correspondencia con un compañero de Framingham que acostumbraba a escribirle cartas de quince pliegos) advirtió que Verena volvía a entrar en la casa, aunque sola. La hizo detenerse y le dijo que esperaba que no hubiera arrojado al señor Ransom al mar.

—No, no, el señor Ransom se ha marchado por el otro camino.

—Muy bien, espero que dé pronto alguna conferencia en nuestro favor.

Verena dudó un momento antes de responder:

—Él se expresa por medio de la pluma. Ha escrito un magnífico artículo para la *Rational Review.*

La señorita Birdseye observó a su joven amiga con expresión satisfecha.

—Bueno, es un placer comprobar cómo ha ido evolucionando, ¿no es verdad?

Verena no supo qué responder; luego, al recordar que la doctora Prance le había dicho que podían perder a su querida anciana compañera cualquiera de estos días, y uniendo este pensamiento con lo que Ransom acababa de decirle, o sea que la *Rational Review* era una publicación trimestral y que el director le había hecho saber que su artículo no aparecería en el siguiente número sino en el posterior, reflexionó que tal vez la señorita Birdseye no viviría tanto tiempo como para darse cuenta de la manera en que se expresaba su supuesto colaborador. Por consiguiente podía dejarle creer lo que quisiera, sin temor a las consecuencias. Verena no se comprometió a nada sino que solamente besó en la frente a la anciana.

—¡Pero Verena Tarrant, qué fríos están tus labios! —exclamó la señorita Birdseye.

A Verena no le sorprendió saber que sus labios estaban fríos; sentía que un hielo funesto la había penetrado solo de pensar en la tremenda escena que le esperaba con Olive.

La encontró en su habitación, donde se había refugiado para evitar la presencia del señor Ransom; estaba sentada al lado de la ventana; era evidente que se había dejado caer en una silla en el momento en que entró; desde allí había podido ver a Verena caminar por el jardín hasta llegar a la bahía al lado del intruso; y permanecía como si se hubiera derrumbado, como si se sintiera postrada; su actitud era semejante a aquella en que Verena la había encontrado la vez de su anterior salida en Nueva York. La muchacha no se imaginaba lo que Olive fuera a decirle; su mente estaba absorta en sus propios pensamientos. Se dirigió inmediatamente hacia ella y cayó de rodillas, tomó las manos de Olive, que estaban apretadas con nerviosa intensidad sobre su regazo, permaneció un momento en silencio, mirándola, y luego le dijo:

—Hay algo que deseo confesarte sin un momento de demora; algo que no te dije cuando ocurrió ni después. El señor Ransom fue una vez a visitarme en Cambridge poco antes de que partiéramos para Nueva York. Pasó un par de horas conmigo; luego dimos un paseo y visitamos la universidad. Después de ese encuentro fue cuando me

escribió y yo respondí a su carta, como te dije en Nueva York. No te hablé entonces de su visita. Hemos hablado mucho sobre él y sin embargo te oculté ese hecho. Lo hice a propósito; no puedo explicarte por qué, salvo que no quería decírtelo y que pensé que era mejor así. Pero ahora quiero que lo sepas todo; cuando sepas lo que ocurrió lo sabrás todo. Fue solo una visita… de unas dos horas. Me agradó mucho… parecía estar muy interesado. Una razón por la que no te hablé de esto era porque no quería que supieras que había ido a Boston y me había ido a buscar a Cambridge sin haberte visitado. Pensé que te resultaría desagradable saberlo. Supongo que vas a pensar que te he mentido; la verdad es que puedo darte esa impresión equivocada. Pero ahora quiero que lo sepas todo… ¡todo!

Verena habló de un tirón casi sin aliento; había una especie de pasión en el modo en que trataba de expiar su antigua falta de franqueza. Olive la escuchaba con estupor; al principio parecía casi no entender. Pero Verena advirtió que la entendía perfectamente cuando oyó su estallido:

—¡Me has engañado… me has engañado! Bueno, he de confesarte que prefería tu engaño a estas monstruosas revelaciones. ¿Y qué importa eso cuando ha venido a buscarte hasta aquí? ¿Qué es lo que quiere? ¿A qué ha venido?

—Ha venido a pedirme que me case con él.

Verena dijo esto con la misma prisa y con la firme determinación de no incurrir en esa ocasión en ninguna culpa. Pero tan pronto como acabó de hablar sepultó su cabeza en el regazo de Olive.

Olive no hizo nada para que la volviera a levantar, ni respondió a la presión de sus manos; solo se sentó en silencio por un momento, durante el cual Verena se asombró de que el episodio de la visita en Cambridge no la hubiera perturbado más profundamente. Pero luego descubrió que el horror de lo que había ocurrido la tenía como paralizada. Al fin Olive preguntó:

—¿Fue eso lo que te dijo cuando estabais en la playa?

—Sí —Verena levantó la mirada—; quería que lo supiera desde el primer momento. Dice que considera correcto con respecto a ti hacer saber desde el principio sus intenciones. Dice que quiere probar y hacer que él me guste. Quiere verme más y quiere que lo conozca mejor.

Olive se apoyó en el respaldo de la silla, con las pupilas dilatadas y los labios separados.

—Verena Tarrant, ¿qué es lo que existe entre vosotros? ¿De quién puedo fiarme? ¿Qué cosa puedo ya creer? ¿Así que dos horas en Cambridge antes de que fuésemos a Nueva York? —El sentimiento de que Verena había sido pérfida entonces, pérfida por reservada, comenzó a invadirla—. ¡Dios mío, cómo has podido actuar de esa manera!

—Olive, fue solo por no afligirte.

—¿Por no afligirme? ¡Si en verdad deseabas no afligirme no estaría él ahora aquí!

La señorita Chancellor pronunció esas palabras con tal violencia, en un espasmo de tal naturaleza que hizo que Verena se apartara y se pusiera de pie. Durante un instante las dos jóvenes permanecieron frente a frente, y una persona que las hubiera visto en ese momento habría podido pensar que se trataba de dos rivales y no de dos amigas. Pero tal aversión no podía durar sino unos cuantos segundos. Verena respondió con voz que no temblaba por pasión, sino por piedad:

—¿Quieres insinuar con eso que yo lo esperaba, que yo lo hice venir aquí? Nunca en mi vida me he sentido tan sorprendida como cuando lo vi en la terraza.

—¿Es que ni siquiera tiene la delicadeza que podía esperarse de uno de sus capataces de esclavos? ¿No se ha dado cuenta de que lo detestas?

Verena miró a su amiga con una expresión severa que era muy rara en ella.

—No lo detesto… solamente me desagradan sus opiniones.

—¡Te desagradan! ¡Oh, qué miseria!

Y Olive miró a través de la ventana abierta, apoyando la frente sobre la tela metálica.

Verena permaneció por un momento sumida en sus dudas, luego se acercó a Olive y le pasó un brazo en torno a la cintura.

—¡No me rechaces! ¡Ayúdame… ayúdame! —murmuró.

Olive le lanzó una mirada de enojo; luego la atrajo hacia ella y volviéndola a mirar frente a frente le preguntó:

—¿Te irías ahora conmigo en el próximo tren?

—¿Huir de él nuevamente como ya lo hice en Nueva York? No, no, Olive Chancellor, esa no es la manera —continuó Verena, razonablemente, como si toda la sabiduría de la

historia se hubiera posado en sus labios—. Además, ¿cómo sería posible abandonar a la señorita Birdseye en el estado en que se encuentra? Debemos permanecer aquí, debemos librar aquí la batalla.

—¿Por qué no eres sincera del mismo modo que has sido falsa? Realmente sincera y no a medias. ¿Por qué no reconoces francamente que lo amas?

—¿Amarlo, dices? ¡Pero si apenas lo conozco!

—Ya tendrás la oportunidad de hacerlo si, como dice, va a permanecer un mes aquí.

—Debo confesar que no me resulta desagradable, como a ti. Pero ¿cómo podría amarlo cuando me dice que quiere que lo abandone todo, nuestro trabajo, nuestro futuro, que no vuelva a pronunciar otro discurso, que no vuelva a abrir mis labios en público? ¿Cómo aceptar todo eso? —continuó Verena con una extraña sonrisa en los labios.

—¿Te ha pedido eso? ¿Te lo ha exigido?

—No, no de ese modo. Es muy bondadoso.

—¿Bondadoso? ¡El cielo te asista! ¡No te humilles hasta ese grado! —añadió Olive después de un momento.

—Por supuesto que no pondrá un pie en la casa, si tú se lo prohíbes.

—¿Para que entonces puedas encontrarte con él en otros lugares? En la playa… en el campo.

—La verdad es que no pienso evitarlo, ni huir de él —dijo Verena, con orgullo—. Pensé que había logrado convencerte en Nueva York de que realmente me interesan nuestras aspiraciones. Y precisamente por ser consciente de mis fuerzas me enfrentaré a él. ¿Qué importa que me guste? Me gusta el trabajo que desarrollo en el mundo, me gusta más todo aquello en lo que creo.

Olive la escuchó hasta el final, y el recuerdo de cómo en el hotel de la calle Diez Verena había eliminado sus dudas volvió a ella con una fuerza que le hizo considerar la situación actual como menos terrible. De cualquier manera no pareció estar de acuerdo con la lógica de la muchacha; se conformó con responder:

—Pero entonces no querías volver a verlo; huiste de Nueva York a pesar de que yo deseaba que permanecieras allí. Te perturbó mucho; no estabas tan tranquila como finges estarlo ahora. Con tal de alejarte de él abandonaste todo lo demás.

—Sé muy bien que no estaba tranquila. Pero ahora he tenido tres meses para pensar sobre… sobre la manera en que entonces logró perturbarme. Puedo ver las cosas con mayor serenidad.

—No, no es cierto; ahora mismo no te sientes tranquila.

Verena permaneció silenciosa durante un momento, mientras los ojos de Olive continuaban investigándola, acusándola, condenándola.

—Razón de más para que dejes de darme una puñalada tras otra —respondió con una gentileza infinitamente conmovedora.

El efecto de esas palabras sobre Olive fue instantáneo; estalló en lágrimas y hundió la cara en el pecho de su amiga.

—No me abandones, no me abandones, o me harás morir de dolor —sollozó estremecedoramente.

—¡Debes ayudarme… debes ayudarme! —gritó Verena, también con voz implorante.

XXXVII

Basil Ransom pasó casi un mes en Marmion; al anunciar este hecho soy enteramente consciente de su carácter extraordinario. La pobre Olive debió de haberse sentido verdaderamente alarmada al verlo presentarse allí; ya que después de su marcha de Nueva York se había arraigado en su alma la convicción de que había terminado definitivamente con él. No solo el impulso de repulsión con el que Verena había exigido que su partida del hotel de la calle Diez fuera inmediata, le parecía una prueba de que, para su joven amiga, había sido suficiente tocar la textura moral del señor Ransom con los dedos para retroceder por entero horrorizada; pero lo que supo por boca de su compañera respecto a las proposiciones que le hacía de abandonar sus actividades acrecentaba su sentimiento de seguridad. Ransom había hablado a Verena de la pequeña excursión como de la última oportunidad que tenía para conquistarla, le hizo entender que la consideraba no como el inicio de un conocimiento más íntimo sino como el fin mismo de las relaciones existentes entre ellos. La había abandonado por razones que solo él conocía. Si había querido espantar a Olive debió de considerar que ya la había espantado demasiado; su caballerosidad de hombre del Sur tal vez le sugirió que debía dejarla en paz antes de atormentarla hasta la muerte. También era indudable que había percibido cuán vano era su intento de hacer abjurar a Verena de una fe fundada sobre bases tan sólidas; y aunque la admirara lo suficiente como para desear poseerla en su propio terreno, se estremecía ante las mortificaciones que podía reservarle el futuro; podía advertir que, después de cortejarla durante seis meses y a despecho de toda su simpatía y sus deseos de lograr hacer lo que esperaba de ella, la joven seguía despreciando sus opiniones con la misma firmeza con que lo había hecho el primer día. Olive Chancellor era capaz, dentro de ciertos límites, de creer en lo que

deseaba creer, y esa era una de las razones por las que había aceptado la huida de Verena de Nueva York después de demostrarle a su amiga que deseaba beber más de aquella copa, disfrutar un poco más de aquel paraíso de tontos. Si ella hubiera tenido menos temor habría visto las cosas con mayor lucidez; se habría dado cuenta de que no huimos de la gente a menos que la temamos, y que nuestro temor surge solo cuando nos sentimos desarmados. Verena sentía miedo de Basil Ransom (aunque en esa ocasión había decidido no huir); pero también era cierto que se sentía muy bien armada; le había dicho a Olive que se sentía expuesta al peligro, le había pedido que fuera su defensa. La pobre Olive se sentía afligida como nunca antes lo había estado, pero lo extraordinario del peligro le confería una energía desesperada. Lo único que la confortaba de su situación era que Verena le había confesado el peligro, y se había abandonado en sus manos.

—Me gusta, no puedo remediarlo, verdaderamente me gusta. No quiero casarme con él, no quiero abrazar sus ideas, que son falsas y horribles hasta un grado incalificable; pero me gusta más que cualquier otro hombre que haya conocido.

La muchacha le había anunciado todo esto a su amiga tan pronto como la conversación de la que he dado un breve esbozo fue retomada, como muy pronto lo fue, de eso pueden estar seguros, y muy a menudo en el transcurso de los siguientes días. Era su modo de decir que una gran crisis se había presentado en su vida, y aquella declaración no necesitaba demasiados detalles para constituir una tímida aceptación de que también ella había sucumbido a la pasión universal. Olive había tenido antes sospechas y terrores, pero en esa ocasión pudo ver cuán vanos y tontos habían sido, y que esto era un problema muy distinto a cualquiera de las «fases» cuyo desarrollo había seguido hasta ese momento con tanta ansiedad. Como ya he dicho, consideraba que era una gracia considerable el que la actitud de Verena fuese franca, ya que eso le proporcionaba un apoyo al cual asirse; no hubiera sido ya posible mantenerla marginada con sofismas sobre la conveniencia de recibir visitas de jóvenes apuestos e inescrupulosos en vista de las oportunidades que eso proporcionaba para convertirlos a las nuevas ideas. En consecuencia adoptó su línea de conducta con pasión y furia; después del colapso que le produjo la llegada de Ransom, decidió que él no la iba a encontrar en una silenciosa sumisión. Verena le había dicho que necesitaba su

intervención y su socorro, y no debía temer ni por un instante que ella se durmiera en su puesto de vigía.

—Me gusta… me gusta; pero quiero odiar…

—Lo que quieres es odiarlo —la interrumpió Olive.

—No, quiero odiar la idea de que me guste. Quiero que me presentes todas las razones por las cuales debo hacerlo… algunas de ellas tremendamente importantes. ¡No dejes que ninguna se me escape! No temas que no te quede agradecida cuando me las recuerdes.

Ese fue uno de los singulares discursos de Verena en el curso de su constante discusión del terrible problema, y hay que confesar que hizo muchos por el mismo estilo. Lo más extraño de todo el asunto era que seguía protestando una y otra vez contra la idea de Olive de buscar seguridad en la retirada. Decía que aquello entrañaba una pérdida de dignidad, que se había sentido avergonzada después de haber huido de él en Nueva York. Esa preocupación por las apariencias morales era algo del todo nuevo en Verena, ya que aunque había tocado aquel recurso en precedentes ocasiones e insistido en que era su deber enfrentarse a los accidentes y azares de la vida, nunca había enarbolado tal bandera frente a un desastre tan inminente. No tenía por costumbre hablar ni pensar en su dignidad, y cuando Olive la oyó adoptar esa postura, sintió más que nunca que lo siniestro, tremendo, fatal de la situación era sencillamente que, por primera vez en la historia de su sagrada amistad, Verena no era sincera. No era sincera cuando decía que quería ser ayudada a luchar contra el señor Ransom, cuando la exhortaba a mantener ante su mente todo lo que pudiera fortalecerla. Olive no llegó al grado de creer que estuviera desempeñando un papel para entretenerla con palabras que, haciendo brillar su traición, solo conseguirían hacerla más cruel; debía admitir que aquel engaño era inconsciente, que Verena era la primera en engañarse a sí misma, pensando que en realidad quería ser salvada. Sus frases sobre la dignidad insincera, así como el pretexto de que debían permanecer en Marmion para velar por la salud de la señorita Birdseye, ¡como si la doctora Prance no fuera lo suficientemente capaz de realizar aquella función! Además le encantaría desembarazarse de ellas. Olive había intuido perfectamente para esas fechas que la doctora Prance no simpatizaba con su movimiento, ni con las grandes ideas; que simplemente se interesaba en problemas

mezquinos de fisiología y en sus actividades profesionales. Nunca la hubiera invitado de haber descubierto antes lo que la seca actitud de la doctora frente a todas sus discusiones, lecturas y campañas, y sus constantes excursiones de pesca y en busca de variedades botánicas le permitía comprobar. Era una mujer de ideas muy estrechas, pero parecía que conocía mejor las peculiares condiciones físicas de la señorita Birdseye —y en verdad eran muy peculiares— que cualquier otro médico, y eso era un consuelo en los momentos en que aquella mujer admirable parecía sufrir de una pérdida de vitalidad.

—El punto importante de la situación es que llegará un momento en que deberá aceptarlo y será un inmenso alivio saber que todo ha terminado. Él está decidido a plantarme batalla y si la lucha no se libra hoy será mañana. No veo por qué no sea esta una ocasión tan buena como cualquier otra. Mi conferencia para el Music Hall está prácticamente terminada; y no tengo ninguna otra cosa que hacer, así que puedo consagrar toda mi atención a nuestro debate personal. Requiere una buena dosis de esfuerzo, lo tendrías que admitir si supieras cuán maravillosamente sabe hablar. Si mañana abandonáramos este lugar lo tendríamos tras nosotras al día siguiente. Nos seguiría por todas partes. Hace poco hubiéramos podido escapar, porque él afirma que entonces no tenía dinero. Tampoco ahora tiene mucho, pero sí el suficiente como para comprar un billete de ferrocarril. Está tan entusiasmado con la aceptación de su artículo por el director de la *Rational Review* que tiene seguridad de que en el futuro su pluma será para él un recurso.

Verena expresó estas opiniones tres días después de la llegada de Basil Ransom a Marmion, y cuando llegó a este punto, su compañera la interrumpió con la pregunta:

—¿Es con eso con lo que se propone mantenerte? ¿Con su pluma?

—Sí, pero por supuesto admite que seríamos terriblemente pobres.

—¿Y esa visión de una carrera literaria se basa completamente en un artículo que aún no ha visto la luz? No puedo concebir cómo un hombre de cierto refinamiento puede hacerle proposiciones matrimoniales a una mujer cuando ocupa una posición tan miserable en la vida.

—Dice que no lo hubiera hecho, que se hubiera sentido avergonzado de hacerlo hace tres meses; a eso se debe que cuando estuvimos en Nueva York, y él ya sentía

entonces… bueno, al menos eso dice, todo lo que siente ahora, decidió no insistir, dejarme marchar. Pero posteriormente tuvo lugar un cambio; sus ideas cambiaron del todo en el curso de una semana, como resultado de la carta que le escribió el director de la revista sobre su colaboración, y el hecho de habérsela pagado previamente. Era una carta en extremo halagadora. Dice que ahora cree en su futuro, tiene la visión de que obtendrá celebridad, influencia y fortuna, tal vez no grande, pero la suficiente como para hacer tolerable la vida. No considera que la vida en sí misma sea deliciosa, pero una de las mejores cosas que un hombre puede hacer es conquistar a una mujer (por supuesto deberá gustarle muchísimo, para que valga la pena) y tenerla a su lado.

—¿Y no podría haberse fijado en otra sino en ti… entre los muchos millones que constituyen nuestro sexo? —refunfuñó la pobre Olive—. ¿Por qué tenía que haberte elegido precisamente cuando todo lo que sabe de ti le debía demostrar que eres la última persona en quien podía pensar?

—También yo le hice esa pregunta y me respondió que uno no puede razonar sobre estas cosas. Se enamoró de mí la primera noche que me vio, el día que hablé en casa de la señorita Birdseye. Así que puedes ver que había cierto fundamento en tus extraños temores. Parece que le gusté más que cualquier otra.

Olive se dejó caer en el sofá, ocultando la cara en los almohadones, que estrujó en medio de su desesperación, y arguyó que Ransom no amaba a Verena, que nunca la había amado, que solo el odio que sentía por su causa lo había llevado a fingir esa pasión; quería hacerle daño, hacerle todo el mal de que una persona es capaz… No, no la amaba, la detestaba, deseaba solo sofocarla, destruirla, asesinarla… como ella se daría cuenta infaliblemente si llegaba a hacerle caso. Era solo porque sabía que su voz tenía un poder mágico y desde el momento que había escuchado la primera nota había decidido destruirla. No era la ternura la que lo movía… era una malignidad demoníaca; la ternura hubiera sido incapaz de exigir el horrible sacrificio que tenía la desvergüenza de exigirle, al pedirle que cometiera actos de perjurio y de blasfemia, que abandonara una obra, unos intereses en que estaban comprometidas hasta las fibras más íntimas de su corazón, le exigía que abjurara de todo su joven pasado, de sus más sagradas ambiciones. Olive no reclamaba nada para sí, no pronunció, por lo menos al principio, ni una palabra de reproche en nombre de su pérdida personal, de su triste

unión; habló solo de la indecible tragedia que significaría el abandono de sus ideales, del fracaso de Verena para llevar a cabo aquello que había emprendido, del horror de ver su brillante carrera hundida en la oscuridad y las lágrimas, de la alegría y el sentimiento de exaltación que hubieran tenido todos sus adversarios ante aquella ilustre y consumada prueba de la volubilidad, la futilidad, la fatal servidumbre a la que estaban predestinadas las mujeres. Solo bastaba con que silbara un hombre para que ella, que había alentado aspiraciones más altas, corriera feliz a postrarse a sus pies. La protesta más apasionada de parte de Olive se compendiaba al decir que si Verena debía abandonarla, su deserción retrasaría la emancipación de la mujer por lo menos cien años. No era que, durante aquellos espantosos días, Olive hablara continuamente; pasó largos momentos de concentrado, absorto silencio, lleno de una intensa angustia, interrumpido de pronto por discusiones apasionadas, desafíos, invocaciones. Verena en cambio hablaba incesantemente; Verena adoptaba una actitud del todo nueva en ella, y, como todo el mundo podía observar, una actitud poco natural, ficticia. Si se estaba engañando a sí misma, como Olive decía, había algo muy conmovedor en sus esfuerzos, en su ingenuidad. Si intentaba parecer ante Olive imparcial, fríamente juiciosa, en su actitud hacia Basil Ransom, solo ansiosa de ver, únicamente por una satisfacción moral, qué bien se defendía este como enamorado y hasta qué punto había logrado conmoverla, ella se entregaba, aún más seriamente, a engañar a su propia imaginación. Insistía en aportar pruebas sobre lo desesperada que se sentiría en el caso de que él lograra vencer sus resistencias, y procuraba armarse de argumentos aún más convincentes, si ello era posible, que los aportados por Olive sobre él, porque debía mantenerse fiel a sus antiguas ideas y porque debía resistir aun a costa de un sufrimiento pasajero. Se volvió voluble, parlanchina, febril; volvía al tema constantemente, como para alentar a su amiga y demostrarle que permanecía en plena posesión de sí misma, que mantenía su independencia.

Es difícil imaginar una situación más extraña que la que vivían aquellas dos jóvenes durante esos días; era tan singular, sobre todo en el caso de Verena, que me resisto a presentársela al lector con un tono realista. Para comprenderla es necesario tener en mente su peculiar franqueza, natural y adquirida; su costumbre de discutir problemas, sentimientos y principios morales; su educación en la atmósfera de salas de

conferencias y de *séances*; su familiaridad con el vocabulario de la emoción y los misterios de «la vida espiritual». Había aprendido a respirar y a moverse en un aire rarificado como hubiera aprendido a hablar chino si su éxito en la vida dependiera de eso; pero toda su actitud y su desenvoltura artificialmente espontánea no constituían una parte de su esencia, una expresión de sus preferencias más profundas. Lo que era en realidad una parte de su esencia era la extraordinaria generosidad con la que se exponía, se concedía, se entregaba para satisfacer a cualquier persona que le exigía algo. Olive, como ya sabemos, había reflexionado que nadie se preocupaba menos que Verena de la idea de su propia dignidad, y aunque la joven la había adoptado como excusa para permanecer en Marmion, debía admitirse que en realidad su deseo de ser coherente resultaba, en la práctica, muy deficientemente expresado. Olive había contribuido con todo su celo al desarrollo del talento de Verena; pero difícilmente me atrevería a imaginar lo que Olive, en sus más profundas e íntimas meditaciones podría pensar sobre las consecuencias de cultivar una elocuencia tan abundante. ¿Habría dicho que Verena estaba tratando de sofocarla con sus propias frases? ¿Habría advertido con desmayo el efecto fatal de tratar de tener una respuesta preparada para cada problema? La situación de Olive durante esos lamentables días nos exige cierta decencia, una delicadeza impuesta por respeto a sus desventuras. Le era imposible comer o dormir; no podía hablar sin estallar en lágrimas; se sentía implacable e insidiosamente frustrada. Recordaba la magnanimidad con que había declinado aceptar (hacía dos inviernos) el voto de virginidad eterna que al principio había exigido y luego no aceptado por considerarlo como una prueba demasiado cruel, pero que Verena, en un momento precioso, perdido para siempre, hubiera concedido de buena gana. Se arrepentía de no haberlo hecho, con amargura y rabia; y luego se preguntaba con mayor desesperación aún si hubiera sido capaz, en el caso de haber obtenido aquella promesa, de hacerla respetar frente a las complicaciones actuales. Creía que si estuviera en su poder decir: «No, no te dejaré marcharte, tengo tu promesa solemne, y no te lo permitiré», Verena se habría inclinado ante aquel decreto y hubiera permanecido a su lado; pero la magia habría desaparecido para siempre de su espíritu, la dulzura de su amistad, la eficacia de su trabajo. Se decía una y otra vez que Verena había cambiado extraordinariamente desde la vez en que había regresado junto a ella, en Nueva York,

después de su paseo con el señor Ransom, y entre sollozos le había pedido que la sacara de allí a toda prisa. En aquel momento la joven se había sentido herida, ultrajada, asqueada, y en el intervalo no había ocurrido nada, nada salvo aquel intercambio de cartas que ella conocía, que hubiera podido conducirla a su desvergonzada tolerancia de ahora. Verena misma admitía que era desvergonzada; no hacía sino asentir ante esa expresión, y explicaba, cada vez con la misma ansiedad, como si fuera la primera, qué había sucedido, qué era lo que la hacía actuar de esa manera. Lo que sencillamente ocurría era que él le gustaba, eso era cierto, y era el único punto de vista desde el cual se podía contemplar la situación de modo que condujera a lo que ella llamaba una solución real… un descanso permanente. Sobre este punto de vista en particular Verena nunca respondía, de aquel modo liberal al que ya he aludido, sin aseverar al mismo tiempo que lo que más deseaba en el mundo era demostrar (la imagen que Olive le había mostrado desde un principio) que una mujer podía vivir y persistir ligada a una gran idea, vivificante y redentora sin la ayuda de un hombre. Testimoniar hasta el final contra la rancia superstición —madre de todos los misterios— de que aquellos seres no eran indispensables como se autoproclamaban a los cuatro vientos; contra eso protestaba apasionadamente con una inspiración que nunca antes había tenido.

El único y minúsculo consuelo que Olive extrajo de los terrores que la oprimían era el saber que ya conocía lo peor; lo supo cuando Verena le habló, después de una larga y odiosa reserva, del detestable episodio de Cambridge. Aquello le parecía lo peor porque había sido un trueno en un cielo sereno; el incidente se había producido meses antes, cuando parecía que no existía ningún problema. Aunque Verena hizo después todo lo posible para reparar su pérfido silencio, repitiendo todo lo que había ocurrido entre ellos mientras estuvieron sentados en Monadnoc Place o durante el paseo por la universidad, en Olive nació la idea de que aquella ocasión era la clave para entender todo lo que había pasado después; en aquella ocasión él había adquirido un irremediable ascendiente sobre ella. Si Verena se lo hubiera dicho entonces, nunca hubiera consentido en llevarla a Nueva York, la única compensación por aquel odioso error era que la muchacha, reconociéndolo plenamente, juzgaba en las actuales circunstancias que no podía ser lo bastante comunicativa. Hubo ciertas tardes de

agosto, largas, bellas y terribles, cuando se sentía que el verano estaba a punto de doblar su curva, y el sonido de las copas de los árboles bajo la luz dorada, sacudidos por una brisa que debía de ser deliciosa, parecía la voz del otoño venidero, de las advertencias y peligros de la vida, horas portentosas e insufribles, cuando sentada bajo la vid levemente movida de la pérgola al lado de la señorita Birdseye trataba de calmar sus nervios leyendo algo en voz alta para su huésped, y el sonido de su propia voz temblorosa le hacía pensar más en aquel funesto día en Cambridge que en el hecho de que en ese mismo momento Verena estuviera «fuera» con el señor Ransom, que hubiera salido a dar su paseo diario con él. (Habían establecido que a eso debían reducirse sus relaciones sociales.) He dicho establecido; pero no es esa exactamente la palabra para describir el compromiso al que habían llegado por una especie de tácito intercambio de lagrimosas súplicas y estrechos abrazos, después de que Ransom le hubiera confirmado a Verena que, en efecto, permanecería un mes en el lugar y ella le hubiera prometido que no recurriría a bajas evasiones ni a la fuga (que de nada le servirían, según afirmó Ransom), sino que le daría la oportunidad de escucharlo diariamente unos cuantos minutos. Él había insistido en que esos cuantos minutos fueran una hora. Vagaban a lo largo de la playa hasta un sitio rocoso, cubierto de arbustos, un paseo que tenía exactamente aquella duración. Allí, toda la languidez de la región, la atmósfera suave y fragante del Cabo, la dulzura de las arenas blancas, de las aguas tranquilas, los bajos promontorios donde había algunos senderos bajo los algarrobos y algunos pozos de agua que brillaban a la luz del crepúsculo, en aquellos momentos, todo el espíritu de la tarde estival parecía flotar en la atmósfera. Daban también paseos por los bosques, donde las irregularidades del terreno habían colocado a los árboles con raros efectos de «estilo» y donde los espacios cubiertos de césped, con su fragancia y su placidez, se convertían de pronto en rincones arcádicos. En tales lugares Verena escuchaba a su acompañante reloj en mano, y se preguntaba con toda sinceridad cómo él podía interesarse en una muchacha que imponía condiciones de tal manera odiosas. Por supuesto Basil Ransom había reconocido desde el principio que no era posible presentarse otra vez ante la señorita Chancellor, y, después de aquella incómoda visita matutina que ya he descrito, no osó, durante las tres primeras semanas de su estancia en Marmion, penetrar en la casa cuyas ventanas posteriores daban a los desiertos

astilleros. Olive, como es de imaginar, no hizo aquella vez ninguna protesta para salvar las apariencias o para reprocharle que estaba conduciendo a su joven compañera por el camino errado. La situación entre ellos era demasiado tensa; era una lucha a muerte, y se trataba de demostrar quién era el más fuerte. Así, Verena acudía a las citas con el joven como si fuera una sirvienta, y Basil Ransom su «enamorado». Se encontraban a cierta distancia de la casa, en las afueras de la población.

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Olive pensaba que había conocido lo peor, como ya hemos percibido; pero lo peor era algo que no podía conocer, ya que Verena hasta esa ocasión había sido siempre muy reservada en relación con ese asunto, tan reservada como era locuaz sobre cualquier otro tema. El cambio que se había operado en el objeto de la implacable devoción de Basil Ransom después del episodio de Nueva York se podía resumir brevemente de la siguiente manera: las palabras que él le había dicho allá sobre su verdadera vocación, muy diferentes del vacuo y falso ideal que le habían impuesto tanto sus familiares como Olive Chancellor, aquellas palabras, las más efectivas y penetrantes que él hubiera jamás pronunciado, se habían depositado en su alma y allí trabajaban y fermentaban. Al final había llegado a creer en ellas, y en eso consistía la alteración, la transformación. Habían encendido una luz bajo la cual la muchacha se veía de un modo completamente nuevo y lo extraño era que a ella le gustaba más esa imagen que la que proyectaba, con exagerado encanto, bajo las viejas lámparas de las salas de conferencias. Verena no podía decirle eso a Olive, pues sería como descargar un golpe que llegaría a la raíz de todo, y la sensación terrible y deliciosa que experimentaba la llenaba de una especie de temor reverencial por todo lo que implicaba y presagiaba. Estaba a punto de quemar todo lo que había adorado; estaba a punto de adorar todo lo que había quemado. Lo más extraordinario era que aunque sentía que la situación era tremendamente grave, no experimentaba ninguna vergüenza por la traición que ella —sí, decididamente, ya para entonces tenía que admitirlo— preparaba. Se trataba solo de que la verdad había cambiado de sitio; aquella imagen radiante comenzó a mirarla a través de los ojos expresivos de Basil Ransom. Amaba, estaba enamorada… lo sentía en cada partícula de su cuerpo. En vez de haber sido constituida por la naturaleza para abrigar ese

sentimiento en un grado excesivamente pequeño (cosa que estaba implicada en el meollo de su cruzada, y por eso había ofrecido su renunciación hacía tiempo a Olive) se daba cuenta de que por el contrario había sido creada para amar con la mayor intensidad posible. Se trataba en realidad siempre de la misma pasión; pero el objeto se había vuelto otro. Había creído hasta entonces que en su espíritu había una especie de doble llama, la mitad de la cual se dirigía hacia una amistad íntima con una persona verdaderamente extraordinaria y la otra se dirigía hacia los sufrimientos de las mujeres en general. Verena contemplaba estupefacta el polvo incoloro en que, en solo tres breves meses (a partir del episodio de Nueva York), se habían convertido sus antiguas convicciones; pensaba que el toque que había logrado producir aquel cataclismo debía de ser un toque mágico. Por qué precisamente Basil Ransom había sido designado por la suerte para provocar aquel encantamiento, era más de lo que ella podría decir… pobre Verena, ella que hasta hacía poco se jactaba de ser la única persona que poseía una varita mágica en el bolsillo.

Cuando lo veía acercarse a ella, a eso de las cinco de la tarde —la hora en la que acostumbraban encontrarse—, o esperarla en una curva del camino, que se perdía después de dos o tres kilómetros de curvas tortuosas e irregulares en la punta de la lejana costa, donde la abeja zumbaba perezosamente durante las horas más calientes con un vuelo vago y sin dirección precisa, sentía que su alta figura, con el amplio horizonte por fondo, representaba muy bien la importancia, el lugar preeminente que en su mente ocupaba Basil. El joven se había convertido ya para entonces en la única realidad presente, el objeto más definido y preciso, el más incomparable que existiera en el mundo. Si él no hubiera estado en su puesto cuando ella esperaba encontrarlo ella habría tenido que detenerse para apoyarse en algo a fin de no caer; todo su ser habría temblado de una manera más dolorosa de lo que ya temblaba en esos momentos, pues el solo hecho de verlo a lo lejos, esperándola, bastaba para ponerla nerviosa. ¿Y quién era, qué era él?, se preguntaba la muchacha. ¿Qué otra cosa le ofrecía fuera de la oportunidad (en la que no había ninguna compensación de bienestar ni de elegancia) de traicionar, de una manera escandalosa, todas las esperanzas y los votos que hasta entonces había ofrecido? Él no le permitía que se hiciera ninguna ilusión sobre el porvenir que le esperaba cuando fuera su mujer; no se lo pintaba con colores suaves ni

le prometía que resultara fácil; por el contrario, le decía que viviría en la pobreza y en la oscuridad, que sería la compañera de sus luchas, de su severo, duro y áspero estoicismo. Cuando él hablaba de aquella manera y la miraba a los ojos, ella no podía ocultar las lágrimas; sabía que la felicidad para ella consistía en introducirse en la vida de él, por árida y triste que pudiera ser, y a pesar de los terribles y crueles obstáculos. No se debe pensar que la revolución que tenía lugar en Verena no estaba exenta de sufrimientos. Sufría menos que Olive, desde luego, ya que no se inclinaba de manera natural, como su amiga, en aquella dirección; pero a medida que el eje de su experiencia daba la vuelta tenía la sensación de que sus sufrimientos habían disminuido mucho. Pese a su carácter alegre y vivaz, su índole sensible y generosa, sus maneras afables y su deseo de complacer a los demás, una fuerza que nunca antes había conocido la impulsaba a complacerse a sí misma, y la pobre Verena vivía en aquellos días en un estado de tensión moral —como si se la hubiera sometido a un esfuerzo exagerado y violento— que ella no revelaba del todo, solo porque no era propio de su naturaleza adoptar actitudes de desesperación. Su corazón sentía una profunda piedad por Olive, y se preguntaba hasta cuándo sería necesario continuar por la senda del autosacrificio. Nada faltaba para que el daño que estaba haciendo fuera completo; había engañado a Olive hasta el fondo; apenas tres meses antes había reafirmado sus votos, comprometido su palabra, con todas las pruebas de fidelidad y entusiasmo. Había momentos en que Verena sentía que no debía atormentarse más sino contentarse con la conclusión de que amaba tan profundamente como puede amar una mujer y que eso era todo. Sentía que las exigencias de Olive se volvían demasiado intolerables y terribles. Se decía a sí misma que nunca se atrevería a confesárselo, que no podría soportar enfrentarse a la escena final, que no tenía el derecho de arruinar todo el futuro de aquella pobre criatura. Podía imaginarse lo que serían los años terribles que vendrían; sabía que Olive no lograría reponerse nunca de la desilusión. La heriría en el punto más sensible; permanecería incurablemente sola, eternamente humillada. Su amistad era algo muy especial; tenía elementos que hacían que probablemente fuera una de las más completas (entre mujeres) que podían existir. Por supuesto se manifestaba más de parte de Olive que de la suya, siempre había sido consciente de ello; pero eso, se volvía a decir, no tenía la menor importancia. De nada le servía decirse que había

sido Olive quien había iniciado el trato y que ella solo había respondido en un primer momento, por cortesía, a una simpatía tan abrumadoramente manifestada. Se había entregado por entero, y debía haber actuado de otra manera si no tenía intenciones serias de mantener su palabra. Al final de aquellas tres semanas de examen de conciencia sentía que en el fondo no había llegado a nada excepto a interesarse inmensamente en las opiniones de Basil Ransom y a la perspectiva de provocar una eterna desolación. Él le había dicho que quería que lo conociera, y ahora ella lo conocía ya por completo. Lo conocía y lo adoraba, pero eso tampoco suponía ninguna diferencia. Renunciar a él o renunciar a Olive… tal vez este último esfuerzo era mayor que el otro.

Si Basil Ransom tenía la ventaja, desde aquel paseo en Nueva York, de haber sabido tocar una fibra de su ser que vibraría posteriormente, es fácil imaginar que procuraría mantener viva aquella vibración. Si había logrado proyectar una nueva luz en la mente de Verena, y le había hecho sentir que era más atractiva la idea de entregarse a un hombre que a un movimiento, también encontró medios para profundizar esa iluminación y arrojar al polvo los antiguos principios de la muchacha. De cualquier modo él se encontraba en una situación muy especial, la de quien tiene que continuar un asedio con las manos atadas. Como debía concentrarlo todo a solo una hora diaria, percibió que debía confinarse a lo esencial. Lo esencial era mostrarle cuánto la amaba y luego presionarla, presionarla, presionarla siempre. El hecho de tener que vagar en torno a la casa de la señorita Chancellor era una extraña imposición a la que había tenido que someterse; sentía no poder visitar nuevamente a la señorita Birdseye, y además no sabía qué hacer con el tiempo durante las mañanas y por las noches. Por fortuna había llevado consigo algunos libros (volúmenes amarillentos, comprados en los puestos de libros de segunda mano en Nueva York) y podía dedicarse por lo menos a ellos cuando todo lo demás le estaba vedado. Algunas veces por las mañanas tenía el recurso de la doctora Prance, con quien hizo muchas excursiones por la bahía. Era una gran aficionada a ir en barca y una apasionada pescadora, habían tomado la costumbre de caminar juntos por la bahía, lanzar sus anzuelos, y decir una prodigiosa cantidad de herejías. Se encontraba con él, igual que Verena, «en los alrededores», pero con un espíritu diferente. A él le divertía inmensamente la actitud de la doctora y vio que no

había nada en el mundo que pudiera asombrarla. Nunca se escandalizaba ni mostraba sorpresa por nada; tenía el aire de admitir como hechos de la naturaleza cualquier anomalía; no se mostraba de ninguna manera sorprendida ante la rara situación de Ransom; no decía nada que indicara que hubiese advertido que la señorita Chancellor vivía en un estado de frenesí o que Verena tenía todos los días un compromiso. Por sus maneras uno hubiera podido creer que le parecía natural que Ransom se sentara a medio kilómetro de la casa sobre una valla como si fuera una de las mecedoras que adornaban la terraza posterior de casa de la señorita Chancellor. Lo único que al joven le disgustaba de la doctora Prance era la impresión que le daba (y no llegaba a comprender como una mujer tan discreta podía dejar filtrar aquella impresión) de que consideraba a Verena Tarrant cómo una joven sin la menor importancia. Miraba con cierta ironía toda forma de enamoramiento y Ransom percibió que no le asombraba que las mujeres fueran tan tontas, ya que, fuera cual fuese la tontería que cultivaban, encontrarían siempre a un hombre que iría a sentarse en una valla a esperarlas. La doctora Prance le había dicho que la señorita Birdseye no se había dado cuenta de nada; que a los pocos días de llegar él había caído en una grave somnolencia, y ni siquiera parecía saber si el señor Ransom estaba cerca de allí o no. Posiblemente había pensado que había ido solo por un día y que se había marchado; tal vez suponía que solo había ido para avivar la llama de la antorcha de Verena Tarrant. A veces, en la barca, ella se le quedaba mirando en un vago y cordial silencio, mientras esperaba que picara un pez (cuando aquello ocurría enloquecía de júbilo) con expresión diabólicamente maliciosa. Cuando no estaba con la doctora Prance asándose de calor (el sol de Massachusetts no le molestaba), Ransom daba paseos por los prados que se elevaban (a una altura muy moderada) por encima de la playa. Llevaba siempre un libro y se tendía bajo la sombra de los árboles y planeaba un poco el siguiente ataque a Verena. Al final de dos semanas había logrado (por lo menos así lo creía) mucho más de lo que había esperado, ya que la muchacha parecía ver con mayor claridad lo que era su «don». Le había asombrado la rapidez con que Verena había decidido renunciar a la idea de que se trataba de algo útil y precioso. Eso era lo que Ransom había deseado que hiciera, y el hecho de que el sacrificio le costara tan poco probaba sus puntos de vista, le aclaraba que no era necesario para la felicidad de la muchacha pasar

la mitad de su vida perorando (aunque lo hiciera muy hermosamente) en público. A pesar de todo, se decía a sí mismo que para recompensarla de la pérdida de todas las alegrías que seguramente le habría deparado la fama, él debía mostrarse absolutamente complaciente con ella en todos los años futuros. Durante la primera semana que estuvo en Marmion, ella le hizo una pregunta referente a ese punto.

—Bueno, si se trata de una mera ilusión, dígame por qué la naturaleza tenía que proporcionarme este talento superfluo. No es que me preocupe demasiado, no me importa decírselo; pero debo confesar que me gustaría saber en qué se transformará esa parte de mi personalidad si me retiro a la vida privada y vivo, como dice usted, sencillamente para resultarle encantadora. Seré como una cantante con una voz bellísima (usted mismo ha reconocido la belleza de mi voz) que acepta la orden de no volver a emitir una sola nota más. ¿No es eso un gran desperdicio, una gran violación de la naturaleza? ¿No es cierto que el talento se nos ha concedido para hacer buen uso de él?, ¿tendremos el derecho de privar a nuestros semejantes del placer que podríamos proporcionarles? En las condiciones que usted me promete —aquel era el modo de Verena de aludir a la petición de matrimonio—, no veo qué recompensa haya para la pobre y fiel sierva despedida. Usted me dice que mi razón de existir consiste en resultarle encantadora, pero hay personas que me han dicho que cuando estoy en la tribuna resulto encantadora para todo el mundo. Usted mismo me lo ha dicho. Tal vez tiene intenciones de hacer construir un escenario privado en nuestro salón principal para que yo pueda dirigirme a usted todas las noches y hacerle conciliar el sueño después del trabajo. Hablo de nuestro salón principal dando por hecho que tendremos dos. Pero al parecer nuestros medios no nos lo permitirán. Deberemos eso sí tener un lugar para comer y así podremos instalar el escenario en la sala.

—Mi querida joven, será muy fácil resolver ese problema; la mesa del comedor será nuestra plataforma y usted tendrá que subirse encima.

Esa fue la respuesta que Ransom dio en broma a la petición de luz de su compañera, y el lector observará que si ella no se preocupó por llevar más a fondo su investigación era porque resultaba muy fácil de contentar. En las palabras con que él prosiguió su discurso había un tono más serio y un juicio más sano respecto al misterio en que ella quería insistir.

—¿Encantadora para mí y encantadora para todo el mundo? ¿En qué se convertirá ese encanto? ¿Es esto lo que desea usted saber? Será cinco mil veces más grande de lo que es ahora, eso es lo que le va a pasar. Encontraremos muchos caminos para encauzar su talento, nos hará más agradable la existencia. Créame, señorita Tarrant, estas cosas se arreglan por sí solas. No va usted a cantar en el Music Hall, pero va a cantar para mí; cantará para todos los que la conozcan y la rodeen. Su don es indestructible; no me hable como si yo quisiera extirparlo o disminuirlo. Lo único que deseo es darle otra dirección; nunca he dicho que quiera yo que cese en sus actividades. Su don es el don de la expresión, y nada podría yo hacer para volverlo menos expresivo. Esta virtud no deberá manifestarse a una hora fija de un día determinado sino que irrigará, fertilizará, adornará brillantemente su conversación. Piense en lo agradable que resultará cuando esta influencia se vuelva verdaderamente social. Su facilidad de conversación, como la llama usted, la convertirá en la mujer más encantadora de todo el país.

En efecto, había que temer que Verena se dejara convencer con demasiada facilidad (convencer, quiero decir, no de que ella debiera sucumbir ante él, sino de que había verdades encantadoras, olvidadas, casi insospechadas del lado de Basil Ransom), y una prueba ulterior de ese hecho consistió en que después de la primera o segunda vez Verena no encontró nada que replicar (aun cuando a sí misma se decía siempre muchas cosas) sobre el cruel efecto que su apostasía tendría sobre Olive. Evitó hacerle presente esa razón después de ver lo mucho que él se enfadaba y con qué desprecio salvaje se refería a un pretexto tan endeble. Él le preguntaba si consideraba más conveniente unirse con una solterona morbosa más que con un joven honorable; y cuando Verena pronunciaba el nombre sagrado de la amistad, él preguntaba por qué fanáticos sofismas debía él quedar excluido de ese privilegio. Ella le había dicho en un momento de distensión (Verena creía estar siempre en guardia, pero esa guardia dejaba muy a menudo mucho que desear) que la visita a Marmion mostraba, a la verdadera luz, según Olive, los principios de caballerosidad de Ransom. Olive declaraba que debía considerar el acoso al que sometía a Verena como una persecución a ella misma. Verena se arrepintió, inmediatamente, de haberle ofrecido a Ransom nuevos argumentos para sus punzantes comentarios; pero un instante después pudo percibir que no había producido un grave daño, ya que Basil tomó las consideraciones de Olive sobre su

gentileza como un simple motivo para reír. Verena no podía saber, ya que el joven no lograba frenar su hilaridad y explicárselo, que él había resuelto mentalmente este problema antes de abandonar Nueva York, cuando le había escrito una carta (después de que ella partiera de la ciudad) a la que ya se ha hecho alusión, y que era sencillamente la continuación de la carta que le dirigió después de la visita a Cambridge: una amistosa, respetuosa pero bastante significativa señal de que, decididamente, la separación no implicaba para él la idea de silencio. Conocemos un poco su manera de pensar, lo esencial, y sabemos que la razón que lo había lanzado a ese viaje era la inesperada noticia alentadora del director de una revista. La importancia de ese hecho (en su fantasía, se acrecentaba indudablemente por su deseo de tener una excusa que pudiera justificar la línea de conducta que había decidido tomar) era mucho menor de lo que él suponía; sin embargo, produjo una apreciable revolución en sus sentimientos, y le llevó a preguntarse qué clase de consideración debía (según los más estrictos códigos sociales del Sur) tener hacia la señorita Chancellor cuando se propusiera hacer la corte en serio a Verena. No tardó en decidir que no le debía ninguna. La caballerosidad se refiere a las relaciones con personas que uno odia, no que uno ama. Él no odiaba a la pobre señorita Olive, aunque algunas veces esta hacía todo para merecerlo, y aun en el caso de que la odiara, un tipo de caballerosidad que le hubiera exigido abandonar a la joven que adoraba con el fin de que su prima en tercer grado pudiera ver que él era galante, sería una caballerosidad absurda. La caballerosidad significaba tolerancia y generosidad hacia los débiles; y la señorita Olive no era de ninguna manera un ser débil, era una mujer que combatía, y combatiría contra él hasta morir, sin concederse la menor tregua. Sentía que lo estaba combatiendo durante todo el día desde su casita convertida en fortaleza; sentía su resistencia en el mismo aire que él respiraba, y Verena a veces llegaba a sus citas con el semblante tembloroso y pálido que testimoniaba la pugna.

Con el mismo espíritu jocoso con que consideraba los puntos de vista de Olive sobre la conducta que debía observar un nativo de Mississippi, Basil le habló a Verena sobre la conferencia que esta estaba preparando para su gran presentación en el Music Hall. Se enteró de que ella iba a conquistar el campo a la manera de la señora Farrinder, haciendo una campaña de invierno, llevando con ella un fusil muy poderoso. Habían

concertado una serie de compromisos, la ruta había sido trazada; esperaba repetir su conferencia en unos cincuenta lugares diferentes. Se titulaba «La razón de la mujer», y tanto Olive como la señorita Birdseye opinaban que era posible decir de antemano que aquel era un esfuerzo de lo más prometedor. En esa ocasión Verena no confiaría solo en la inspiración; no quería encontrarse con el gran público de Boston sin tantear antes qué terreno pisaba. La inspiración, por otra parte, parecía haber perdido terreno. Bajo la influencia de Olive, había leído y estudiado mucho para que cada una de sus palabras adoptara la forma apropiada de antemano. Olive tenía un sentido crítico espléndido, le gustara a él reconocerlo o no, y había hecho a la joven pronunciar cada palabra de la conferencia por lo menos veinte veces. No había una entonación que no le hubiese hecho repetir; se trataba de una cosa muy diferente a su viejo estilo, cuando su padre le transmitía la inspiración. Aunque Basil consideraba a las mujeres como seres superficiales, era una verdadera lástima que no pudiera contemplar los métodos habituales de preparación de Olive, ni tampoco asistir por las noches a los ensayos en el pequeño salón. La actitud de Ransom sobre la presentación en el Music Hall se podía resumir de esta manera: estaba decidido a impedirla si le era posible. Ridiculizó toda la historia al hablar con Verena y los dardos que le disparaba iban tan lejos que podía darse cuenta de que ella pensaba que exageraba su disgusto. Pero la verdad era que el joven no podía manifestar su antipatía de modo más exagerado, tan odiosa le parecía la idea de que ella fuera a ser lanzada dentro de poco a una carrera estúpida. Ransom juró que la muchacha no daría aquel paso inicial que irreparablemente la llevaría en caso de éxito (y tendría éxito, el joven no tenía la más mínima duda de su poder para lograr un triunfo sensacional en el Music Hall) a las aclamaciones de los periódicos. No le importaban los compromisos de Verena, las campañas, la expectación de sus amigas. Su aspiración más profunda era acabar con todo aquello de un solo golpe. Sería su gran triunfo, el símbolo de su victoria. Se había convertido en una idea fija y por ello prevenía una y otra vez a la muchacha contra la conferencia. Cuando ella se echaba a reír y decía que no veía cómo era posible impedir la presentación, a no ser que él la secuestrara, Basil sentía compasión por ella, por no advertir que sus ominosas galanterías ocultaban la firmeza de sus propósitos. Casi se sentía capaz de secuestrarla. Era posible respirar en la atmósfera la noción de que ella

se iba a convertir en una figura «de gran popularidad», y esa idea sencillamente lo enfermaba. Sus sentimientos eran diametralmente opuestos a los del señor Matthias Pardon.

Una tarde, mientras regresaba con Verena de un paseo realizado dentro de las normas prescritas, vio a lo lejos a la doctora Prance, que salía de la casita con la cabeza descubierta y cubriéndose los ojos para evitar los reflejos del sol; miraba a un lado y a otro del camino. Era parte de las reglas establecidas que Ransom debiera separarse de Verena antes de llegar a la casa, y se acababan de detener para intercambiar las últimas palabras (cada día la situación era mejor que el anterior) cuando advirtieron que la doctora Prance les hacía señas con mucha animación. Se dieron prisa, mientras Verena se llevaba las manos al corazón, pues por un instante pensó que algo terrible le había ocurrido a Olive; tal vez se había desmayado, tal vez había muerto por no poder soportar la crueldad de la tensión en que vivía. La doctora Prance los miraba acercarse con una extraña expresión en la cara; no era una sonrisa, sino una manera exagerada de hacer notar que no se daba cuenta de nada. En un instante los puso al corriente de lo que ocurría: la señorita Birdseye había sufrido un repentino colapso; había declarado repentinamente que se estaba muriendo, y su pulso, en efecto, había prácticamente cesado. Se hallaba en la terraza con la señorita Chancellor, y con ella, y ambas habían tratado de llevarla a su cama. Pero la anciana no deseaba moverse; estaba muriendo y quería morir precisamente allí, en aquel lugar tan agradable, en su sillón, mirando el crepúsculo. Preguntó por la señorita Tarrant y entonces la señorita Chancellor la informó de que había salido a dar un paseo con el señor Ransom. Le sorprendió enterarse de que aún estaba allí el señor Ransom; suponía que se había marchado. (Basil sabía, por Verena, que su nombre no le había sido mencionado a la anciana señorita desde la mañana en que se presentó.) Expresó entonces el deseo de verlo, tenía algo que decirle; y la señorita Chancellor le había dicho que volvería pronto, con Verena, y que lo llevarían a su lado. La señorita Birdseye expresó el deseo de que no tardaran demasiado; sentía que eran sus últimos momentos; la doctora Prance añadió, como una persona que sabe muy bien lo que dice, que en efecto se trataba del fin. Había salido dos o tres veces a la carretera a esperar su regreso, y ahora tenían que darse prisa. Verena, apenas oyó las palabras de la doctora, entró corriendo en la casa.

Ransom la siguió con la doctora Prance, consciente de que para él la ocasión era doblemente solemne: por una parte, se trataba de ver a la pobre señorita Birdseye entregar su filantrópica alma, y por otra, de recibir indudablemente de la señorita Chancellor un recordatorio de que ella no tenía intenciones de abandonar la partida.

En el tiempo que le llevó hacer esta reflexión ya estaba en presencia de su prima y de su venerable huésped, que estaba sentada precisamente como la había visto la vez anterior, cubierta de mantas de lana y con el sombrero puesto, en la terraza posterior de la casita. Olive Chancellor se hallaba a un lado sujetándole una de las manos, y en el otro estaba Verena, que había caído de rodillas, inclinada sobre su regazo.

—¿Me ha llamado usted…? ¿Quería usted verme? —dijo la joven tiernamente—. Nunca me volveré a alejar de aquí.

—Oh, no te entretendré mucho tiempo; era solo para verte por última vez.

La voz de la señorita Birdseye era muy baja, como la de una persona que respirara con dificultad; pero su tono no era doloroso ni quejumbroso; mostraba solo la plácida fatiga que había caracterizado enteramente el último período de su vida, y que le hacía adoptar un aspecto angelical ahora que estaba a punto de expirar. Reclinaba la cabeza contra el respaldo de la silla, con el lazo de su viejo sombrero de paja suelto y la tardía luz de agosto bañaba su rostro octogenario y le confería una belleza especial, una doble placidez. Ransom advirtió algo augusto en la renuncia confiada de su mirada, algo que parecía decir que desde hacía tiempo ella estaba dispuesta a dar aquel paso, pero como no había llegado aún la hora, se había conformado con esperar, con su fe acostumbrada en que todo resultaría siempre mejor; ahora que le había llegado la hora no pudo sino sentir que era de veras un lujo, el mayor lujo del que había disfrutado. Ransom adivinó por qué motivo los ojos de Verena se habían llenado de lágrimas, cuando la joven dirigió la mirada a su paciente y vieja amiga; a menudo durante esas tres últimas semanas le había hablado de las historias que la señorita Birdseye le había contado sobre su gran obra en la vida, su misión, repetida año tras año, entre los negros del Sur. Había llegado hasta ellos tomando todas las precauciones para enseñarles a leer y a escribir. Les había llevado la Biblia y les había dicho que los amigos que tenían en el Norte rezaban por su liberación. Ransom estaba seguro de que Verena no le relataba aquellas historias para avergonzarle por su origen sureño y su relación con las personas

que, en un pasado no muy remoto, habían hecho necesaria aquella clase de apostolado; estaba seguro de eso porque Verena sabía muy bien lo que él pensaba sobre ese capítulo; le había hecho una especie de sumario histórico del problema de la esclavitud que no le dejaba margen a pensar que él era menos inflexible ante ese ejemplo particular de la imbecilidad humana de lo que era con cualquier otro. Y Verena le había dicho que eso era precisamente lo que le hubiese gustado hacer, vagar sola, con su vida en la mano, con una misión de caridad que cumplir, a través de un país en que la sociedad entera se alineara contra ella. Le hubiera gustado mucho más realizar aquellas obras que hacer un simple discurso sobre derechos humanos desde una tribuna bien iluminada de Nueva Inglaterra. A lo que Ransom solo había respondido: «¡Charlatanerías!», convencido, sin duda como sabemos, de que conocía más sobre la naturaleza profunda de Verena que ella misma. Eso a Verena no le impedía, y él era perfectamente consciente de ello, advertir que había llegado demasiado tarde para vivir la época heroica de la vida en Nueva Inglaterra y contemplar a la señorita Birdseye como un monumento inmemorial de ella. Ransom podía compartir esa admiración, sobre todo en aquellos momentos. En varias ocasiones le había dicho a Verena que le habría gustado haber podido encontrar a la anciana en Carolina o Georgia antes de la guerra, acompañarla en sus pasos entre los negros y hablar con ella sobre las ideas de Nueva Inglaterra; había muchas que ahora ya no le interesaban, pero que en aquella época le hubieran resultado extraordinariamente estimulantes. La señorita Birdseye se había prodigado con tanta generosidad toda la vida que era bastante raro que le hubiera quedado algo que ofrendar en el supremo instante. Cuando Ransom miró a Olive, advirtió que su prima se proponía ignorar su presencia; y durante los minutos que permaneció en el lugar no se encontraron sus miradas. Lo que hizo, en cambio, fue volverle la espalda cuando la doctora Prance dijo, inclinada sobre la señorita Birdseye:

—Le he traído al señor Ransom, ¿no recuerda que quería hablarle?

—Me da mucho gusto poder verla de nuevo —comentó Ransom—. Ha sido usted muy buena al pensar en mí.

Al oír el sonido de su voz, Olive se levantó y cambió de asiento; se desplomó en una silla al otro extremo de la terraza, y le dio la vuelta para apoyar sus brazos en el

respaldo y hundió la cabeza en ellos.

La señorita Birdseye miró al joven, distinguiéndolo muy vagamente.

—Creí que se había marchado; nunca más nos ha vuelto a visitar.

—Pasa casi todo su tiempo haciendo largos recorridos por el campo; le gusta mucho el paisaje —dijo Verena.

—Por lo que he podido ver desde aquí, me doy cuenta de que es muy bello. Desde los primeros días me he encontrado sin fuerzas para moverme, aunque ahora voy a moverme. —Sonrió cuando Ransom hizo un gesto como para ayudarla y añadió—: No, no quiero decir que me voy a mover de esta silla.

—El señor Ransom ha salido en barca algunas veces conmigo. Le he mostrado cómo se lanza el sedal —dijo la doctora Prance, que parecía menospreciar las actitudes sentimentales.

—Bueno, bueno, veo que se ha integrado usted muy bien en nuestro grupo; creo que se dan todas las razones para que sienta que pertenece a los nuestros.

La señorita Birdseye contempló a su huésped con una especie de seriedad vaga, como si se esforzara en comunicarse todavía con él; luego volvió ligeramente la mirada en derredor, como tratando de saber qué ocurría con Olive. Advirtió que la señorita Chancellor se había retirado y entrecerró los ojos y se perdió por un momento, infructuosamente, en aquel misterio que no lograba resolver, las peculiares relaciones de Basil Ransom con la anfitriona. Era visible que se hallaba muy débil como para poder concentrarse demasiado en el problema; ahora que iba a morir sentía un deseo profundo de conciliar todas las oposiciones y de crear armonía a su alrededor. Pero a la vez emitió un imperceptible suspiro, una vaga confesión de que la cosa era demasiado confusa y que renunciaba. Por un momento Ransom había pensado con temor que iba a pedirles a Olive y a él que se estrecharan las manos, con lo cual hubiera perecido enteramente satisfecha. Pero vio que las fuerzas comenzaban a abandonarla, y que, además, comenzaba a perder la claridad, para su indecible alivio, pues aunque no hubiera puesto objeciones a estrechar la mano de Olive Chancellor, la expresión del rostro de ella y el estar vuelta hacia el otro lado con aquel aire de desesperada apatía mostraban muy bien cómo hubiera recibido su proposición. La señorita Birdseye se aferraba con benévola perversidad a la idea de que, a pesar de la exclusión de la casa,

lo que tal vez se debía a celos de Olive porque su amiga tuviera otras relaciones personales, era Verena quien lo había atraído a su gran causa y lo había persuadido a colaborar con ellas. Ransom no lograba explicarse por qué aquello podía ilusionar tanto a la señorita Birdseye; sus contactos en el pasado habían sido tan fugaces que él no podía explicarse a través de ellos el interés que la anciana mostraba por sus ideas y el deseo de que arrojara su peso en el plato justo de la balanza. Era parte del deseo general de justicia que fermentaba en su interior, la pasión por el progreso; y era también de algún modo dictado por el interés de Ransom por Verena, una sospecha, inocente e idílica, como tenía que ser cualquier sospecha de la señorita Birdseye, de que algo había entre ellos, de que la más íntima de las uniones se estaba preparando. El hecho de que fuera un nativo del Sur era, de hecho, la clave de todo: convertir a un sureño era considerado el triunfo más ambicionado para una persona que había podido comprobar, aun en edad avanzada, cuál era la tónica ideológica en los estados del algodón. Ransom no deseaba desilusionarla, y no olvidaba la advertencia hecha por la doctora Prance de no destruirle esa última suposición. Inclinó la cabeza humildemente, sin saber qué había hecho para merecer tanto honor. Sus ojos se encontraron con los de Verena, mientras ella levantaba la mirada hacia él desde el sitio en el que se encontraba, a los pies de la señorita Birdseye, y vio que ella leía en su pensamiento, que se había introducido en él, y que trataba de comunicarle su deseo. El deseo lo conmovió extraordinariamente: Verena tenía un temor loco de que la denunciara a la señorita Birdseye, que le hiciera saber lo mucho que se había enfriado su pasión por la causa. Verena se avergonzaba de eso en aquel momento y temblaba ante el peligro de ser descubierta; sus ojos le suplicaban que tuviera cuidado con lo que dijera. Su temor lo hizo sonrojarse un poco, pues le pareció la máxima confesión de su influencia sobre ella que hasta el momento Verena hubiera admitido.

—Hemos formado un grupo pequeño y feliz —le dijo Verena a la anciana—. Es una delicia que usted haya estado con nosotras durante estas últimas semanas.

—He descansado mucho. Estoy muy fatigada. No puedo hablar mucho. Ha sido un tiempo encantador. He hecho tantas… tantas cosas.

—Yo en su caso trataría de hablar menos, señorita Birdseye —dijo la doctora Prance, que estaba de rodillas al otro lado—. Ya sabemos todo lo que ha hecho usted.

¿No sabe acaso que todos conocemos su vida?

—No ha sido tanto… solo traté de ser útil. Cuando miro hacia el pasado, desde este lugar donde estamos sentadas, puedo evaluar el progreso. Por eso quería verte a ti, y al señor Ransom… porque no me queda mucho tiempo. Estoy contenta de teneros aquí a mi lado, pero no podréis retenerme. Ya no quiero quedarme más tiempo aquí; supongo que me iré a reunir con algunos de los que hemos perdido en nuestra lucha. Sus caras se me aparecen ahora con una gran nitidez. Parece como si me estuviesen esperando; como si estuvieran todos aquí, como si quisieran oír. No debéis pensar que no haya progreso solo porque no se ven todavía los frutos; eso era lo que quería deciros. No es sino después de recorrer un largo camino cuando uno se da cuenta de lo que se ha hecho. Es lo que me pasa ahora cuando veo todo el camino recorrido; veo que en mi juventud nuestra comunidad apenas comenzaba a despertar.

—Usted logró que despertara más que cualquier otra persona; todo, todo se lo debemos a usted, señorita Birdseye —gritó Verena con una repentina y violenta emoción—. Si llegara usted a vivir mil años, seguiría pensando siempre en los demás, sí, solo pensaría en ayudar a la humanidad. Es usted nuestra heroína, nuestra santa, ¡nunca ha existido nadie como usted!

Verena ya no miraba a Ransom para entonces, y ya no se marcaban en su rostro ni súplicas ni ruegos. Una ráfaga de emoción y de pudor se había apoderado de ella… un vivo deseo de reparar su reciente error, al volver a reconocer la nobleza de una vida como la de la señorita Birdseye.

—No, no ha sido demasiado lo que he hecho; solo me he preocupado por los demás y he tenido esperanza. Tú harás más que nadie… tú y Olive Chancellor, porque vosotras sois jóvenes y brillantes, mucho más brillantes de lo que fui yo alguna vez; y además, todo está ya en marcha.

—Usted es quien lo puso en marcha, señorita Birdseye —observó la doctora Prance, con las cejas levantadas, protestando con voz seca pero bondadosa, y levantándose como si fuera algo sin importancia el que su autoridad hubiera disminuido un poco.

Por las concesiones que aquella competente pequeña mujer le hacía a su paciente, se podía deducir que la buena dama se extinguía a toda prisa.

—Pensaremos siempre en usted, y su nombre será sagrado para nosotras, y nos enseñará la sencillez y la devoción —continuó Verena con el mismo tono, tratando de evitar la mirada de Ransom, y hablando como si intentara reafirmarse, como si se estuviera atando por medio de un voto.

—Bueno, es la causa a la que tú y Olive habéis dedicado vuestras vidas y que ha absorbido todas mis energías en estos últimos años. Quería ver que se nos hiciera justicia… No he tenido esa suerte… pero tú la tendrás, y también Olive. ¿Dónde está ahora…? ¿Por qué no se acerca a despedirse de mí? Y el señor Ransom se… se sentirá orgulloso por habernos ayudado.

—¡Oh, piedad, piedad! —gritó Verena sepultando su rostro en el regazo de la anciana.

—No se equivoca usted si piensa que deseo sobre todas las cosas que su debilidad y su generosidad sean protegidas —dijo Ransom, bastante ambiguamente, pero con el debido respeto—. La recordaré como un ejemplo de la capacidad de las mujeres… —añadió; y no se arrepintió de sus palabras, pues consideraba a la pobre señorita Birdseye, a pesar de los tenues rasgos de su rostro, como a una persona esencialmente femenina.

Una especie de gemido frenético fue la respuesta de Olive Chancellor a tales palabras, a cuyo oído sonaron como la expresión del sarcasmo más insolente, y en ese momento la doctora Prance le indicó a Ransom con una mirada que debía retirarse.

—Adiós, Olive Chancellor —murmuró la señorita Birdseye—. No quiero ya permanecer aquí, aunque me fuera concedido ver lo que veréis vosotras.

—¡Yo no veré nada sino vergüenza y ruina! —gritó Olive, avanzando hacia su vieja amiga, mientras Ransom abandonaba discretamente la escena.

XXXIX

Ransom se encontró a la doctora Prance en el pueblo a la mañana siguiente, y tan pronto como la vio supo que el acontecimiento que se esperaba en casa de la señorita Chancellor había tenido ya lugar. No se podía decir que su aspecto fuera fúnebre; pero de cualquier modo contenía un anuncio de que por el momento no debía ya preocuparse por su paciente. La señorita Birdseye había fallecido por la noche muy tranquilamente, una hora o dos después de la visita de Ransom. La habían transportado en su silla de ruedas a la casa; y no hubo nada que se pudiera hacer sino esperar su completa extinción. La señorita Chancellor y la señorita Tarrant se habían sentado junto a ella, sin moverse, cada una sosteniendo una de sus manos, y a eso de las ocho había dejado de respirar. Fue una muerte dulce; la doctora Prance insinuó que nunca había visto a nadie morir tan plácidamente. Añadió que se trataba de una buena mujer, una mujer del viejo estilo; y aquella fue la única oración fúnebre que Basil Ransom oiría pronunciar sobre la señorita Birdseye. La impresión de sencillez y humildad de su fin permaneció con él, y reflexionó más de una vez, en los días siguientes, que la ausencia de pompa y circunstancia que había caracterizado su carrera marcaba también la consagración de su memoria. Había sido casi célebre, se había entregado enteramente a sus obras de caridad, a sus credos y causas; y, sin embargo, las únicas personas para quienes, al parecer, su muerte significaba algo real eran aquellas tres jóvenes veraneantes de la casita de Cape Cod. Ransom se enteró por la doctora Prance de que sus restos mortales iban a ser sepultados en el pequeño cementerio de Marmion, debido al hermoso panorama que tanto le agradaba contemplar, entre viejas y musgosas lápidas de marineros y de pescadores. Había visto el lugar durante los primeros días, cuando todavía podía pasear un poco, y había dicho que le parecía una idea agradable la de

yacer allí. No era una petición, ni una proposición definida; a la señorita Birdseye no se le hubiera ocurrido ni siquiera al final de su vida adoptar tonos de exigencia o hacer, por primera vez en ochenta años, una petición personal. Pero Olive Chancellor y Verena habían recordado sus comentarios sobre la tranquilidad de aquel rincón, al margen de las convulsiones del mundo, que tanto le había gustado a aquella peregrina de la filantropía.

En el curso del día, Ransom recibió una carta de cinco líneas de Verena, en la que le decía que no debía esperar volver a verla por un tiempo; deseaba tener tranquilidad para poder meditarlo todo. Le recomendaba que abandonara el lugar por unos tres o cuatro días; había una multitud de sitios extraños y antiguos que visitar en aquella parte del país. Ransom reflexionó profundamente sobre aquella misiva, y percibió que sería culpado de falta de tacto si no se ausentaba de inmediato. Sabía que, según la opinión de Olive Chancellor, su conducta adolecía de aquel defecto, y que por consiguiente era inútil considerar en qué manera podía desagradarle más o menos. Pero deseaba darle a Verena la impresión de que era capaz de hacer cualquier cosa en el mundo con tal de agradarle a *ella*, excepto abandonarla, y mientras preparaba su maleta tenía la impresión de portarse muy bien, de estar demostrando la más sutil de las formas diplomáticas. Retirarse probaría además cuán seguro se sentía, lo convencido que estaba de tenerla en el puño aunque ella se debatiera y se contorsionara tratando de escapar. La emoción que ella había expresado mientras él permanecía de pie ante la pobre señorita Birdseye no era sino un movimiento instintivo; él había tomado nota de aquello, y se había dicho que ella todavía necesitaba vivir muchas situaciones semejantes antes de tranquilizarse del todo. Una mujer que escucha está perdida, dice el viejo proverbio, ¿y qué otra cosa había hecho Verena sino escuchar durante las últimas tres semanas?; no demasiado tiempo cada día, pero con un grado de atención del cual el hecho de que no se hubiera marchado de Marmion daba la medida. Ella no le había dicho que Olive quería que Verena se fuera, pero no había sido necesaria aquella confidencia para saber que si la joven había permanecido en el lugar era porque ella lo prefería así. Era posible que la joven tuviera la idea de estar luchando, pero si no luchaba con más energía Ransom podía considerar que él estaba marchando directamente hacia el éxito. Verena quería imprimirle a su petición de que se marchara

durante unos cuantos días un tono de rebeldía, pero, decididamente, él no estaba dispuesto a aceptar el golpe. Le agradaba pensar que se comportaba con gran tacto con las mujeres, y estaba seguro de que a Verena esa cualidad la impresionaría mucho al leer, en la nota que envió como respuesta, que había decidido hacer un pequeño viaje a Provincetown. Como no había nadie bajo el bastante maltrecho tejado que lo cobijaba en cuyas manos poder entregar la carta —en el hotel de Marmion cada quien tenía que ser su propio mensajero—, caminó hasta la oficina de correos de la población. Allí encontró a la doctora Prance por segunda vez en ese día; había ido a depositar las cartas en las que Olive notificaba a unas cuantas amigas de la señorita Birdseye el lugar y fecha del funeral. La joven dama se había encerrado con Verena, y la doctora Prance se había encargado de resolver todos los asuntos prácticos. Ransom sintió que no hacía ninguna concesión que contradijera su consideración hacia el sexo al que la doctora a su modo pertenecía, al observar cómo desempeñaba todas las tareas encomendadas con la mayor rapidez y precisión. Le dijo que iba a ausentarse durante unos cuantos días y expresó la cordial esperanza de volver a encontrarla en Marmion cuando regresara.

La mirada penetrante de la doctora Prance lo evaluó por un momento, para ver si estaba bromeando, y luego dijo:

—Bueno, al parecer usted cree que yo puedo hacer lo que quiera. Y la verdad es que no puedo.

—¿Quiere decir que vuelve a su trabajo?

—Sí, mi puesto en la ciudad está vacante.

—Como cualquier otro puesto. Lo mejor sería que permaneciera aquí hasta el fin de la estación.

—Para mí ya ha sido toda una estación. Quiero volver a mi consultorio. Por nadie, excepto por ella, hubiera permanecido fuera tanto tiempo.

—Bueno, adiós entonces —dijo Ransom—. Me acordaré siempre de nuestras pequeñas excursiones. Y le deseo los mayores éxitos en su profesión.

—Por eso es por lo que deseo volver allá —respondió la doctora Prance con sus modales secos y sin matices.

Él la entretuvo todavía un momento más; quería preguntarle por Verena. Mientras permanecía allí dudando sobre el modo en que debía formular su pregunta, ella comentó, queriendo evidentemente dejarle una pequeña muestra de su simpatía:

—Bueno, espero que usted pueda realizar sus proyectos.

—¿Mis proyectos, señorita Prance? ¡Estoy seguro de que nunca se los mencioné! —Luego añadió—: ¿Y cómo amaneció hoy la señorita Tarrant? ¿Se siente más tranquila?

—Oh, no, no está nada tranquila —respondió la doctora Prance tajantemente.

—¿Quiere decir que está trastornada emocionalmente?

—No habla, permanece absolutamente inmóvil, y en igual estado se encuentra la señorita Chancellor. Están inmóviles como dos centinelas… no hablan entre ellas. Pero se puede oír cómo vibra el silencio.

—¿Vibra?

—Sí, las dos están muy nerviosas.

Ransom estaba lleno de confianza, como ya he dicho; sin embargo, el esfuerzo que hizo para extraer un buen augurio de esa imagen de las dos jóvenes en la casita no resultó del todo logrado. Le hubiera gustado poder preguntarle a la doctora Prance si creía que él podría contar al final con Verena; pero era demasiado tímido para hacerlo, sobre todo porque nunca habían tocado el tema de sus relaciones con la señorita Tarrant; además no le interesaba preguntar nada que más o menos implicara la existencia de una duda. Así que llegó a un punto intermedio, con una especie de pregunta general e indirecta sobre Olive; aquello podría arrojar alguna luz.

—¿Qué piensa de la señorita Chancellor…? ¿Cómo la encuentra?

La doctora Prance reflexionó un momento, con la aparente conciencia de que Ransom exigía saber más de lo que preguntaba.

—Me parece que está perdiendo peso —respondió; y Ransom abandonó la empresa, descorazonado, pensando que, sin duda, lo mejor que la doctora podía hacer era volver a hacerse cargo de su consultorio.

Se comportó con mucha elegancia y permaneció en Provincetown una semana, respirando el aire delicioso, fumando innumerables cigarros, y caminando entre los antiguos muelles donde la hierba crecía abundantemente y la impresión de grandeza perdida era todavía mayor que en Marmion. Igual que sus amigas las bostonianas, se

sentía muy nervioso; había días en que pensaba que debía darse prisa y regresar a la orilla de la dulce bahía; las voces del aire le murmuraban que en su ausencia iba a ser derrotado. De todos modos permaneció allí el tiempo que había decidido, y para tranquilizarse se dijo que no había nada que ellas pudieran hacer para evadirlo, excepto tal vez volver a Europa, lo que no le parecía probable. Si la señorita Chancellor trataba de esconder a Verena en algún lugar de Estados Unidos él acabaría por encontrarla, aunque se veía obligado a reconocer que un viaje a Europa lograría derrotarlo, debido a la carencia de recursos para poder seguirlas. Sin embargo, nada resultaba menos probable que emprender un viaje a través del Atlántico en vísperas del anunciado *dêbut* de Verena en el Music Hall. Antes de regresar a Marmion le escribió a la joven para anunciarle su reaparición y hacerle saber que esperaba poder verla a la mañana siguiente. Eso implicaba que deseaba aprovechar el día todo lo que fuera posible; ya estaba harto del sistema que le llevaba a aguardar tediosamente durante tantas horas con la esperanza de poder disfrutar de una pequeña fracción de tiempo antes del anochecer, y en cualquier caso no estaba dispuesto a esperar tanto tiempo el día posterior a su regreso. Volvió de Provincetown en el tren de la tarde y esa misma noche comprobó que las bostonianas no habían abandonado el lugar. Las ventanas de la casa bajo los olmos estaban iluminadas, y él se detuvo en el mismo sitio donde había estado una noche con la doctora Prance y desde donde había oído el oleaje de la voz de Verena mientras ensayaba su conferencia. En esa ocasión no surgía ningún sonido de la casa, ningún signo de vida salvo la luz de las lámparas; el lugar por lo visto no había dejado de mantener aquel extraño silencio del que había hablado la doctora Prance. Ransom consideró que había dado una inmensa prueba de urbanidad al no pedirle a Verena una entrevista inmediatamente después de su llegada. Ella no había contestado a su última carta, pero al día siguiente llegó a la cita, a la hora que él había sugerido; la vio avanzar por el camino, vestida de blanco, bajo un gran parasol, y nuevamente advirtió que le gustaba inmensamente su modo de andar. Sin embargo, le consternó ver su rostro y lo que este presagiaba; con la cara pálida, los ojos enrojecidos, más grave que nunca, parecía haber pasado todo el tiempo que él había estado ausente llorando violentamente. Sin embargo, sus primeras palabras le probaron que no había sido por él por quien había estado llorando.

—¡Solo he venido para decirle que nuestra unión es enteramente imposible! He pensado mucho en todo; he pensado detenidamente, una y otra vez, en todo; y esta es mi respuesta final, definitiva. Debe aceptarla… porque no habrá ninguna otra.

Basil Ransom la miró con el rostro fruncido.

—¿Y me puede explicar por qué?

—¡Porque no puedo, no puedo, no puedo, no puedo! —respondió vehemente, con la cara alterada y desfigurada.

—¡Maldición! —murmuró el joven. Le tomó una mano, la apretó bajo su brazo y la obligó a caminar a su lado por la carretera.

Esa tarde Olive Chancellor salió de casa y vagó largo rato junto a la orilla. Miró de un lado a otro la bahía, las velas que brillaban en el agua azul, destacándose entre la brisa y la luz; eran una fuente de interés para ella como nunca antes lo habían sido. Era un día que estaba destinado a no ser olvidado nunca; Olive sintió que era el día más triste, el más humillante de su vida. La inquietud y el pánico no la dominaban ya como en Nueva York, cuando Basil Ransom había llevado a Verena, para tratar de conquistarla, a pasear por el parque. Pero una carga infinita de angustia parecía pesar sobre su espíritu; sufría por la amargura de su propia melancolía, estaba aturdida y desolada por la desesperación. Se sentía demasiado fatigada para poder luchar contra el destino. Le parecía que casi lo había aceptado mientras paseaba aquella hermosa tarde consciente de que los «diez minutos» que Verena le había dicho que pensaba dedicar esa mañana al señor Ransom se habían transformado de pronto en una excursión de todo el día. Se habían embarcado juntos; uno de los personajes del pueblo, el encargado del alquiler de las pequeñas barcas, había, a petición de Verena, enviado a su hijo pequeño para informar a la señorita Chancellor. No había entendido si los acompañaba el barquero. Aun cuando recibió la información (y la había recibido en un momento de considerable y renovada seguridad) los nervios de Olive no se alteraron tanto como había sucedido, por ejemplo, el día de la excursión en Nueva York; y por eso podía evaluar la distancia del camino recorrido desde entonces. La noticia no la había hecho recorrer un instante después frenéticamente la playa, para gritar a todo bote que pasara y pedirle a los remeros que exigieran el regreso inmediato de la joven que paseaba en una barca por algún sitio de la bahía con un caballero

moreno de pelo negro. Por el contrario, después del primer estremecimiento de dolor que la noticia le produjo, había logrado ocuparse de los quehaceres de la casa, escribir las cartas de la mañana, hacer sus cuentas: cosas en las que había deseado ocuparse desde hacía varios días. Quería evitar pensar, pues conocía las odiosas conclusiones a las que llegaría nuevamente. Estas se podían resumir en el hecho de que no era posible confiar en Verena ni siquiera por una hora. Le había jurado la noche anterior, con un rostro semejante al de un ángel flagelado, que su elección estaba hecha, que su unión y su trabajo representaban para ella mucho más que cualquier otra forma de vida, y que creía profundamente que si en algún momento renegaba de aquellos sacros ideales su vida se consumiría, al final, en medio de sentimientos de culpa y de vergüenza. Vería una última vez al señor Ransom durante diez minutos para decirle una o dos verdades definitivas, y entonces podrían volver a emprender su fructífera, feliz y activa vida anterior. Se entregarían una vez más a su espléndida empresa. Olive había visto cómo la muerte de la señorita Birdseye había conmovido a Verena. Cómo a la vista de la majestuosamente simple extinción de aquella mujer única, de aquella escena en la que de ninguna manera habían participado las vulgares aspiraciones de este mundo, las normas y costumbres baratamente mundanas, la muchacha se había conmovido nuevamente por el espíritu que reinaba en sus horas de mayor confianza, había sido inflamada de la fe con la que ninguna mezquina alegría personal podía compararse, con la idea de poder hacer algo por aquellas que siempre habían sufrido y que todavía esperaban un auxilio. Esto indujo a Olive a pensar que podía comenzar a contar nuevamente con ella, consciente al mismo tiempo de que Verena había sido extrañamente debilitada y extenuada por la prueba que había tenido que soportar. Oh, Olive sabía que ella lo amaba… sabía cuál era la pasión contra la que la desventurada muchacha tenía que luchar; y le hacía justicia como para creer que sus manifestaciones eran sinceras y sus esfuerzos reales. Atormentada y amargada como estaba, Olive Chancellor se proponía ser estrictamente justa y por eso sentía hacia Verena un indecible sentimiento de piedad, la consideraba la víctima de un encantamiento atroz, y reservaba todo su odio y su desprecio al artífice de aquella desgracia común. Si Verena se había subido en un barco con él media hora después de declarar que lo despediría con veinte palabras, era porque él tenía los medios (conocidos por él y por los demás

hombres) para crear situaciones sin salida, para obligarla a hacer cosas que ella podía realizar solo con gran repugnancia, bajo la amenaza de un dolor que podía resultar todavía más agudo. Pero a la vez, lo que resaltaba en toda su dramática realidad era el hecho de que no se podía confiar en Verena, ni siquiera después de que hubiera vuelto a ella con tanto ardor como en los días que siguieron a la muerte de la señorita Birdseye. A Olive le hubiera gustado conocer la punzada de penitencia en que ella, en su lugar, hubiera temido incurrir; ver la puerta cerrada que ella no habría podido abrir ni siquiera haciendo uso de todas sus fuerzas.

Ese conocimiento, inexpresablemente doloroso, de que, después de todo, Verena, en su exquisita delicadeza y generosidad, estaba destinada a demostrar que las mujeres habían sido desde el inicio de los tiempos víctimas del egoísmo y la avidez de los hombres, esa funesta convicción acompañaba a Olive en su paseo, que duró toda la tarde y en el cual halló una especie de trágico alivio. Caminó una gran distancia, deteniéndose en lugares solitarios, con el rostro dirigido hacia la luz espléndida que parecía mofarse de la oscuridad y la amargura de su espíritu. Había pequeños lugares arenosos, de rocas blancas, donde descansó durante largo rato, hundiéndose en ellos como si esperara no poder volver a levantarse jamás. Era la primera vez que salía desde que había muerto la señorita Birdseye, a excepción del momento en que, con una docena de simpatizantes llegadas de Boston, había permanecido de pie junto a la tumba de la anciana. A partir de entonces, durante tres días, había estado escribiendo cartas, contando, describiendo los acontecimientos a quienes no habían estado allí. Había algunas personas, pensó, que deberían haber estado allí, en lugar de enviarle páginas con vagas reminiscencias y pedirle a cambio todos los detalles. Selah Tarrant y su esposa asistieron al sepelio, lo que a su juicio había sido molesto, pues nunca habían tenido trato estrecho con la señorita Birdseye; y si lo habían hecho por Verena, ahí estaba la misma Verena para pagar el tributo debido. La señora Tarrant había esperado con toda seguridad que la señorita Chancellor les pidiera pasar unos días en Marmion, pero Olive no se sentía en condiciones de realizar aquellos gestos heroicos de hospitalidad. Precisamente para evitar ese tipo de cosas le había dado a Selah sumas muy considerables, en dos ocasiones, con un intervalo de un año. Si los Tarrant deseaban cambiar de aires podían viajar por todo el territorio nacional: sus actuales

medios lo permitirían; podían ir a Saratoga o Newport si así lo deseaban. Por su apariencia se vería que podían echarse mano al bolsillo, o por lo menos eso se desprendía del aspecto de la señora Tarrant. Selah seguía vistiendo (en un cálido día de verano) su indescriptible impermeable; pero su mujer se deslizaba sobre las tumbas del cementerio de Marmion con atavíos que Olive (por poco que supiera de aquellos menesteres) podía deducir que eran de alto precio. Además, después de la partida de la doctora Prance sintió que era un alivio que Verena y ella pudieran pasar unos días solas… solas con aquel monstruoso problema que se interponía entre ellas. ¡Aquello era ya suficiente compañía, santo cielo!, y no se había desembarazado de una invitada como la doctora Prance únicamente para reemplazarla por la señora Tarrant.

La extraña aberración de Verena en aquel día particular le sugirió a Olive que no valía la pena luchar, que el mundo entero era una trampa, una mofa, de la que las mujeres nunca lograrían evadirse. ¡La peor de las maldiciones que pesaba sobre ellas era que quienes se entregaban con mayor ardor a la causa de su redención eran las que resultaban más humilladas! Se habría dicho que su debilidad no era solo lamentable sino odiosa… odiosa su predestinada sujeción a la más grosera insistencia por parte de los hombres. ¿Se habrá preguntado en esa ocasión por qué debía consagrar su vida a salvar a un género que, después de todo, no tenía ninguna gana de ser salvado y que rechazaba la verdad aun después de conocer su luz y de haber pretendido haberse alimentado y fortificado con ella? No deseo entrar en esos misterios, son especulaciones que no me conciernen; para nosotros baste con saber que los esfuerzos humanos nunca le habían parecido tan ingratos y estériles como aquella tarde fatal. Sus ojos se posaron en las barcas que veía a la distancia, y se preguntó si en alguna de ellas Verena se dirigiría hacia su destino; pero en vez de hacer señales para que volviera a casa llegó a desear que desapareciera para siempre. Deseó no volver a verla nunca, no tener que soportar los detalles de una separación deliberada. Olive revivió, en medio de aquella infelicidad, su vida durante los dos últimos años; supo nuevamente cuán noble y bello había sido su proyecto, y cómo se había apoyado en una mera ilusión cuyo solo recuerdo le hacía sentir mareos y náuseas. Lo que tenía enfrente era la realidad, con su hermoso cielo indiferente que dejaba caer sus rayos complacientes sobre ella. La realidad era sencillamente que para ella Verena había significado más de

lo que ella había significado para Verena, y que, con su exquisito arte natural, la muchacha se había dedicado a su causa solo porque en ese tiempo no tenía otro interés ni un afecto mayor. Su talento, el talento del que tantos prodigios se esperaban, no le importaba nada, era demasiado espontáneo, lo podía dejar de lado, igual que podía cerrar un piano durante meses enteros; solo para Olive lo había representado todo. Verena se había sometido, había correspondido, se había prestado a los estímulos y exhortaciones de Olive, porque era una muchacha complaciente y joven y tenía una rica imaginación, pero la suya había sido una lealtad de invernadero, el mero contagio de un ejemplo, y un sentimiento surgido de su interior había bastado para que el aire frío la congelara. ¿Se habrá preguntado Olive si durante tantos meses su compañera habría sido la más inconsciente y la más afortunada de las impostoras? Aquí nuevamente debo excusarme por ser incompetente para proporcionar una respuesta. Lo cierto es que Olive no se permitía ninguna concesión en ese momento de trance visionario que parecía secar y dispersar todas las nieblas y ambigüedades de la vida. Esas horas de lucidez retrospectiva les llegan a todos los seres humanos, por lo menos una vez, cuando interpretan el pasado a la luz del presente, con la razón que surge de los hechos, como señales indicadoras que aparecen en lugares donde nunca antes las habían visto. El viaje recorrido se representa gráficamente con todos sus pasos falsos, sus observaciones erróneas, su engañosa geografía. Los seres humanos comprenden entonces muchas cosas, como las comprendía ahora Olive, pero es difícil que lleguen a sufrir como ella sufría. El sentimiento de amargura que le producían todos sus cálculos equivocados ardía en su interior como si fuera una llama, y el esplendor de la visión, sobre la cual la cortina de luto había caído, le llenaba los ojos de lágrimas, lágrimas quedas que fueron surgiendo una a una sin consolar sus nervios ni aligerar su dolorosa carga. Olive pensó en sus innumerables conversaciones con Verena, en los votos intercambiados, en la seriedad de sus estudios, en su fiel trabajo, su recompensa segura, en las noches de invierno transcurridas bajo la luz de la lámpara, cuando se entusiasmaban con previsiones tan justas y una pasión tan elevada como nunca había encontrado acogida en ningún otro par de corazones humanos. El horror de una caída semejante después de haber alcanzado tales alturas solo podía expresarse, mientras la

pobre muchacha prolongaba las inciertas pausas de su inadvertida caminata, en un ronco e inarticulado murmullo de angustia.

La tarde declinaba, comenzaba a soplar ese vientecillo fresco que, a finales de verano, comienza a marcar la brevedad de los días. Olive volvió la cara hacia su casa, y en ese momento se dio cuenta de que si el compañero de Verena no la había traído de vuelta debía comenzar a preocuparse por lo que pudiera haberles ocurrido. Le pareció que ningún velero había podido volver a la población sin pasar frente a sus ojos y mostrarle a quiénes transportaba; había visto una docena con figuras solo masculinas. Un accidente era perfectamente posible (¿qué podía saber Ransom, con sus costumbres de hacendado, del modo de manejar una vela?) y una vez que el peligro apareció fugazmente en su mente —solo las benignas señales del clima habían impedido que se le presentara antes—, la imaginación de Olive se lanzó desbocadamente hacia lo peor. Vio la barca volcada, a la deriva en alta mar, y (después de una semana de inenarrable horror) el cuerpo de una joven desconocida, destrozado al grado de ser irreconocible, con una abundante cabellera roja y un vestido blanco sumergido en el agua, en algún punto lejano de la costa. Una hora antes, su mente se había solazado con una especie de alivio ante la idea de que Verena pudiera perderse para siempre más allá del horizonte, de manera que desaparecieran las tremendas dificultades por las que atravesaban; pero ahora, en aquella hora avanzada, una aguda e incontrolable ansiedad reemplazó a aquella intencionada resignación; apresuró el paso, sintiendo que su corazón galopaba también mientras caminaba. Fue entonces cuando advirtió cómo concebía la amistad, y cómo el hecho de no volver a ver el rostro de una criatura que había acogido en su corazón sería como el golpe de la ceguera. La oscuridad se había vuelto densa cuando llegó al fin a Marmion, e hizo una pausa durante un instante frente a la casa, donde los olmos que se erguían en el césped al borde del camino le parecieron la cortina más oscura que hubiera visto en su vida.

No había luz en ninguna de las ventanas, y cuando abrió la puerta y se encontró en el vestíbulo, escuchando durante un momento, su entrada no obtuvo ningún sonido por respuesta. Su corazón pareció desfallecer: el que Verena estuviera en una barca desde las diez de la mañana hasta la caída de la noche no era de ninguna manera natural, y Olive dio un grito al penetrar en la pequeña sala (oscurecida de un lado, a esa hora, por

el follaje espeso, y del otro por la terraza y la pérgola) que expresaba solo una salvaje pasión, el deseo de volver a abrazar a su amiga nuevamente a cualquier precio, aun el más cruel para ella. Un instante después dio un paso atrás, con otra exclamación, pues Verena estaba en la habitación, inmóvil, en un rincón, en el primer sitio donde se había sentado al llegar a la casa, y la miraba con un aire silencioso y extraño, nada natural, en medio de la penumbra. Olive se detuvo bruscamente, y durante un minuto las dos mujeres permanecieron frente a frente en la oscuridad. Después de eso, Olive siguió sin decir nada; solo se dirigió hacia Verena y se sentó a su lado. No sabía cómo interpretar su conducta. Nunca antes la había visto de esa manera. Era incapaz de hablar; parecía hundida, humillada. Eso era casi lo peor, si algo podía ser peor que los momentos anteriores. Y Olive le tomó una mano con un impulso irresistible de compasión y de consuelo. Por el modo en que la abandonó entre las suyas pudo adivinar todos sus sentimientos; vio que estaba avergonzada, tenía vergüenza de su debilidad, de su rápida rendición, su insana volubilidad de esa mañana. Verena expresó todo eso, sin ninguna protesta y ninguna explicación; parecía como si no quisiera oír ni el sonido de su propia voz. Su silencio era en sí una súplica, una súplica a Olive para que no le hiciera preguntas, que esperara tan solo el momento en que pudiera volver a erguir la cabeza. Olive comprendió, o pensó que comprendía, y la situación se le presentó en toda su tristeza. Lo único que podía hacer era sentarse a su lado y tomarle la mano; cualquier ayuda recíproca estaba en esos momentos más allá de sus posibilidades. Verena echó hacia atrás la cabeza y cerró los ojos, y durante una hora, mientras la noche se apoderaba de la habitación, ninguna de las dos habló. Era indudable que se trataba de una especie de vergüenza. Al cabo de un rato, la doncella se presentó, de forma bastante informal, al estilo de todos los sirvientes del Marmion, en el umbral de la puerta con una lámpara; pero Olive la hizo salir con un ademán frenético. Quería mantener la oscuridad. Se trataba de ocultar aquella vergüenza.

A la mañana siguiente Basil Ransom golpeó con la punta de su bastón en el portal de la casa de la señorita Chancellor, que como de costumbre durante esos días cálidos permanecía abierto. No tuvo que esperar a que la doncella respondiera a su llamada, pues Olive, que tenía razones para creer que él se presentaría, y que había permanecido esperándolo sentada en la sala, apareció en el pequeño vestíbulo.

—Siento molestarla; tenía la esperanza de poder ver un momento a la señorita Tarrant.

Esas fueron las palabras con que (junto a un mesurado ademán de saludo) Basil Ransom saludó a su prima.

Ella se le acercó y lo miró a los ojos. Su extraña mirada verde relampagueó por un instante.

—Es imposible. Puede usted creerme cuando se lo digo.

—¿Por qué es imposible? —le preguntó, sonriendo, a pesar de su malestar interno. Y como Olive no le daba ninguna respuesta sino que se limitaba a mirarlo fijamente con una fría audacia que nunca antes había observado en ella, Ransom añadió una breve explicación—: Simplemente quería verla antes de partir, decirle unas cuantas palabras. Quiero decirle que ayer tomé la resolución de marcharme de este lugar. Tomaré el tren del mediodía.

No había sido por complacer a Olive Chancellor por lo que había decidido marcharse; tampoco se lo decía por eso; sin embargo, le sorprendió que sus palabras no provocaran ninguna expresión de agrado en la cara de ella.

—No creo que tenga demasiada importancia que se marche usted o no. La señorita Tarrant también se ha marchado.

—¿Se ha marchado la señorita Tarrant?

Aquel anuncio contradecía tanto las intenciones que Verena le había expresado la noche anterior, que su exclamación expresó toda su desilusión y su sorpresa, lo cual proporcionó a Olive una momentánea victoria. Era la única que había obtenido hasta el momento, y se debe excusar a la joven por disfrutarla, si es que le era posible disfrutar de algo. La visible derrota de Basil Ransom le resultó más agradable que cualquier otro momento vivido en mucho tiempo.

—Yo misma la acompañé al primer tren; y la vi marcharse. —Y Olive mantuvo descaradamente los ojos fijos en los de él, pues le satisfacía ver cómo el joven encajaba aquello.

Debemos confesar que lo encajó bastante mal. Había decidido que lo mejor sería retirarse, pero el que Verena fuera quien se retirara era ya otro asunto.

—¿Adónde ha ido? —preguntó con el ceño fruncido.

—No me considero obligada a decírselo.

—¡Por supuesto que no lo está! Disculpe mi pregunta. Será mejor que lo averigüe por mi cuenta, porque si le debiera a usted la información, es posible que por cierto sentimiento de delicadeza me molestara en aprovecharla.

—¡Santo cielo! —exclamó la señorita Chancellor ante la idea de que Ransom pudiera tener delicadeza. Luego añadió más deliberadamente—: ¡Nunca lo descubrirá!

—¿Cree usted que no?

—¡Estoy segura!

Y disfrutar tan intensamente de la situación hizo que de sus labios surgiera un agudo, incoherente sonido, que podía parecerse a una risa, una risa de triunfo, pero que, en la distancia, hubiera podido perfectamente ser confundido con un gemido de desesperación. Así sonó a los oídos de Ransom tan pronto como se dio la vuelta.

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Fue la señora Luna quien lo recibió, igual que había sido ella quien lo había recibido con ocasión de su primera visita a la casa de Charles Street; con lo cual no pretendo decir que lo recibiera de la misma manera. En aquella época conocía muy poco de él, y esta última vez lo conocía demasiado como para poder sentirse feliz. Sus modales fueron un poco secos y despectivos, como si cualquier cosa que él pudiera decir o hacer fuera tan solo una prueba de su abominable duplicidad y perversidad. Sostenía la teoría de que Basil Ransom se había comportado con ella vergonzosamente; y él lo sabía, lo que le llevó a reflexionar que sus resentimientos eran tan banales como sus opiniones, ya que si la señora Luna realmente creía en sus agravios, o si tenía un poco de dignidad, no hubiera consentido en recibirlo. El joven no se habría presentado a la puerta de la señorita Chancellor si no hubiese tenido buenas razones para hacerlo, y habiéndolo hecho no se iba a retirar hasta que no hubiera intercambiado unas cuantas palabras con alguien. Había enviado su tarjeta de visita a la señora Luna, después de que le informaran que también ella se encontraba allí, contando con que tal vez por casualidad deseara recibirlo; consideraba que un rechazo podía ser la continuación posible de las cartas que ella le había enviado durante los cuatro o cinco meses anteriores; cartas que él apenas había leído, llenas de alusiones sarcásticas por la manera en que se había comportado con ella en el pasado, cosa que él no recordaba. Aquellas cartas lo aburrían porque eran otros los asuntos que entonces le preocupaban.

—No me sorprende que haya tenido usted el mal gusto, la grosería… —le dijo la señora Luna, tan pronto como lo vio entrar en el salón, mirándolo con una dureza que él no había considerado concebible en ella.

Advirtió que aquella era una alusión al hecho de no haberla vuelto a visitar desde el tiempo en que su hermana había estado en Nueva York; desde la noche de la velada en casa de la señora Burrage había desarrollado hacia ella una aversión que puso fin a sus atenciones. No se rió porque se sentía demasiado angustiado y preocupado; pero respondió, en un tono que aparentemente la irritó como si hubiera sido un indecente regocijo:

—Pensaba que era posible que no quisiera usted verme.

—¿Por qué no iba a querer verlo? ¿Cree usted que me preocupa el hecho de verlo o de dejar de verlo?

—Sus cartas me dejaron suponer que quería verme.

—¿Y entonces por qué pensaba que hubiera podido negarme a recibirlo?

—Porque de esa manera actúan las mujeres.

—¡Mujeres! ¡Mujeres! ¡Sabe usted mucho sobre ellas, según parece!

—Todos los días aprendo algo nuevo.

—Pero, por lo visto, lo que no ha aprendido es a contestar sus cartas. Lo que realmente me sorprende es que no finja no haber recibido las mías.

Ransom pudo esbozar una sonrisa; la oportunidad de dar rienda suelta a la exasperación que lo había estado consumiendo casi le devolvió el buen humor.

—¿Qué podía decir? Sus cartas me abrumaban. Además, respondí a una de ellas.

—¿Una de ellas? ¡Habla usted como si le hubiera escrito una docena! —exclamó la señora Luna.

—Pensé que ese era su propósito… que usted me había honrado dirigiéndome tantas. Eran apabullantes, y cuando un hombre se siente apabullado, está perdido.

—Sí, parece usted un hombre perdido. Me alegra saber que no voy a volver a verlo.

—Ahora comprendo por qué me ha recibido… solo para decirme eso —dijo Ransom.

—Es un placer hacerlo. Regreso a Europa.

—¿En verdad? ¿Debido a la educación de Newton?

—Me pregunto con qué cara puede usted hablarme de él… ¡después del modo en que lo abandonó!

—No toquemos entonces ese tema; voy a decirle lo que deseo.

—No me interesa en lo más mínimo lo que usted desee —comentó la señora Luna—. Ni siquiera ha tenido la atención de preguntarme a qué país voy.

—¿Qué importancia puede tener para mí… una vez que abandone usted estas costas?

La señora Luna se puso de pie.

—¡Ah, la caballerosidad, la caballerosidad! —exclamó, y se dirigió hacia la ventana, una de las ventanas por las que Ransom había podido disfrutar, por invitación de Olive, el panorama de la Back Bay. La señora Luna dirigió a la bahía una mirada que de ninguna manera indicaba pesar por tener que abandonarla.

—Quiero que sepa adónde me dirijo —le dijo después de una breve pausa—. Voy a instalarme en Florencia.

—No tema mi presencia —respondió Ransom—. Yo iré a Roma.

—Y llevará usted más impertinencia consigo de la que se ha visto allí desde la época de los emperadores.

—¿Además de todos sus otros vicios eran también impertinentes los emperadores? Por mi parte estoy decidido a comunicarle el objeto de mi visita —dijo Ransom—. No le haría esta pregunta si pudiera hacérsela a alguna otra persona; pero me veo muy apurado y no sé a quién podría dirigirme.

La señora Luna se volvió hacia él y le dijo con un tono francamente escarnecedor:

—¿Pide usted mi ayuda? ¿Recuerda usted la última vez que yo le pedí que me ayudara?

—¿La noche de la reunión en casa de la señora Burrage? Con toda seguridad no fui descortés entonces. Recuerdo que le insistí en que aceptara una silla, de manera que pudiera usted subirse para poder ver y oír.

—¿Ver y oír qué? ¿Quiere usted explicármelo? ¡Su vergonzoso encaprichamiento!

—Precisamente de eso deseo hablarle —continuó Ransom—. Como usted está al corriente de todo, no tendrá que recibir ningún nuevo golpe, y por lo tanto me atreveré a preguntarle…

—¿Dónde se pueden obtener las invitaciones para la conferencia de esta noche? ¿Es posible que la señorita Tarrant no le haya enviado una?

—Le puedo asegurar que no he venido a Boston para oírla —dijo Ransom con una tristeza que la señora Luna consideró como el ultraje más refinado que podía recibir—.

Lo que quisiera saber es dónde puedo encontrar a la señorita Tarrant en estos momentos.

—¿Considera que me está haciendo una pregunta delicada?

—No veo por qué no lo sea, pero también sé que usted ve las cosas de otra manera, y si se la hago es porque como antes le mencioné no puedo pensar en nadie más que esté en condiciones de auxiliarme. He estado en la casa de los padres de la señorita Tarrant, en Cambridge, pero está cerrada y vacía, parece estar deshabitada. Fue el primer lugar adonde me dirigí esta mañana, tan pronto como llegué; si he tocado a esta puerta fue solo porque mi viaje a Monadnoc Place resultó infructuoso. La sirvienta de su hermana me ha comunicado que la señorita Tarrant no está viviendo aquí, pero añadió que, en cambio, estaba usted. No dudo que no le agrade el que la hayan aludido como una especie de sustitución; y no he dicho a la doncella, ni tampoco a mí mismo, que me daba lo mismo tratar con usted; solo que pensé que tal vez valiera la pena probar. Ni siquiera he preguntado por la señorita Chancellor, pues estoy seguro que ella no me hubiera dado la menor información.

La señora Luna escuchó el candoroso relato del joven con la cabeza vuelta hacia él y sus ojos fijos en los suyos sin la menor simpatía.

—¿Me está proponiendo, si no he entendido mal —dijo después de un momento—, que traicione a mi hermana con usted?

—Algo peor que eso; le propongo que traicione a la misma señorita Tarrant.

—¿Qué me importa a mí la tal señorita Tarrant? No sé de qué me está hablando.

—¿En verdad no tiene usted idea de dónde puede estar viviendo? ¿No la ha visto usted aquí? ¿No están siempre juntas ella y la señorita Chancellor?

A estas palabras la señora Luna se volvió enteramente hacia él y con los brazos cruzados y la cabeza echada hacia atrás, exclamó:

—Mire usted, Basil Ransom, nunca pensé que fuera un necio, pero me parece que desde la última vez que nos vimos ha perdido completamente la razón.

—No me cabe duda —respondió Ransom sonriendo.

—¿Me quiere usted hacer creer que no sabe absolutamente nada sobre la señorita Tarrant?

—En las últimas diez semanas no la he visto ni he sabido nada de ella. La señorita Chancellor la ha escondido.

—¿Escondido? Pero si todos los muros de Boston ostentan su nombre.

—Por supuesto que he visto eso y no me cabe la menor duda de que si espero hasta esta noche podré verla. Pero no quiero esperar hasta esta noche; quiero verla ahora, y no en público; necesito hablar con ella en privado.

—¿Habla usted en serio? No deja de ser interesante todo esto —exclamó la señora Luna con una risa estridente—. ¿Puedo saber qué es lo que se propone?

Ransom dudó un momento antes de responder:

—Temo no poder decírselo.

—Así que su encantadora franqueza conoce también algunos límites. Mi pobre primo, es usted demasiado *naïf*. ¿Cree usted que todo esto pueda importarme un ápice?

Ransom no respondió, pero un momento después no pudo contenerse:

—¿De verdad, señora Luna, no puede indicarme ninguna pista?

—¡Dios mío, con qué ojos tan terribles me mira y qué palabras tan terribles emplea! ¡Y se atreve a hablar de verdad! ¿Piensa usted que me gusta tanto esa criatura que deseo disfrutar de su compañía sin que nadie se interponga?

—No lo sé; no lo entiendo —dijo Ransom en voz baja y suave, pero aún con un fulgor terrible en la mirada.

—¿Y piensa que yo lo entiendo mejor? No es usted un joven serio —continuó la señora Luna—, pero realmente considero que merecía una suerte mejor y no ser engatusado y luego rechazado por una muchacha de esa clase.

—No he sido engatusado. Me gusta mucho, pero ella no me ha correspondido, eso es todo.

Al oír esas palabras, la señora Luna volvió a decir con deliberada mofa:

—Es muy extraño que a su edad sea usted un hombre con tan poco mundo.

Por toda respuesta, Ransom se limitó a observar, pensativamente y con aire ausente:

—Su hermana es realmente una mujer muy hábil.

—Con lo cual me imagino que quiere usted decir que yo no lo soy. —La señora Luna cambió repentinamente de tono de voz y dijo fingiendo la mayor dulzura y humildad—: ¡Dios es testigo de que nunca he pretendido serlo!

Ransom la miró por un momento, y adivinó el sentido que se escondía tras aquella observación. La señora Luna no había perdido aún todas las esperanzas. Basil lo adivinó rápidamente, y el mejor modo de salirle al paso a su interlocutora fue diciendo:

—¿Qué día parte usted hacia Europa?

—Tal vez ni siquiera me embarque —respondió la señora Luna, mirando por la ventana.

—Y entonces, ¿la educación del pobre Newton?

—Trataré de conformarme con la del país que le ha dado a usted la suya.

—¿Así que no quiere convertirlo en un hombre de mundo?

—¡El mundo, el mundo! —murmuró ella mientras observaba, en la oscuridad del crepúsculo, las luces que se encendían en la Back Bay—. ¿Soy acaso feliz, yo que pertenezco al gran mundo?

—Tal vez, después de todo, pueda ir a Florencia —dijo Ransom riéndose.

Ella volvió a enfrentarse a él, pero lentamente, y le declaró que jamás había conocido nada tan extraño como su manera de pensar; le quedaría muy agradecida si le podía dar una explicación. Con las opiniones que él sostenía (era por ellas por lo que le había gustado, y de ninguna manera por su carácter), ¿qué razones lo asistían para andar detrás de una *poseuse* de quinta categoría, y para desear tan enloquecidamente atraparla? Claro que él podía decirle que eso era algo que no le importaba, y ella tendría que callar; por consiguiente admitía que si se lo preguntaba era sencillamente por curiosidad intelectual, y porque uno se queda siempre muy perturbado ante la observación de una contradicción tan penosa. Con todo aquello que le había oído decir sobre sus convicciones y teorías, su visión de la vida y de los grandes problemas del futuro, habría podido pensar que encontrara las actitudes de la señorita Tarrant absolutamente nauseabundas. ¿No eran acaso las ideas de la muchacha las mismas que Olive profesaba? ¿Y no habían chocado debido a ellas Olive y él? La señora Luna preguntaba solo, según decía, porque le intrigaba aquel fenómeno.

—¿No sabe que hay mentes que cuando se encuentran ante un misterio no pueden descansar hasta que no lo han aclarado?

—No podría usted estar más asombrada que yo —dijo Ransom—. Por lo visto la explicación debe encontrarse en una especie de inversión de la fórmula que hace un

minuto tuvo la bondad de aplicarme. A usted le agradan mis ideas, pero no puede tolerar mi carácter. A mí, en cambio, las ideas de la señorita Tarrant me resultan detestables, pero su carácter, bueno, su carácter me gusta.

La señora Luna se le quedó mirando como si considerara que aquella explicación no fuera completa.

—¿Hasta qué punto? —preguntó.

—¿Hasta qué punto qué? —contestó Ransom sonriendo. Luego añadió—: Su hermana me ha derrotado.

—Ya me parecía que había derrotado a alguien últimamente. Se la veía tan feliz y contenta. No creía que fuera tan solo porque yo pensaba marcharme.

—Dice usted que parecía estar muy contenta —dijo Ransom con el corazón apesadumbrado.

Su aspecto era tan triste al decirlo que la señora Luna se sintió autorizada para soltar una carcajada, después de la cual explicó:

—Bueno, cuando digo contenta me refiero a lo que ella puede estar. Todo es relativo. El estado anímico de Olive es indescriptible. No puede permanecer sentada por más de tres minutos. Todo debido a la conferencia que pronunciará su amiga esta noche. Sale por lo menos quince veces al día; ha estado haciendo todos los preparativos, dando entrevistas, redactando telegramas y anuncios; ha hecho tal cantidad de maniobras como si tuviera que dirigir a un ejército entero. ¿Qué es lo que hacen siempre con los ejércitos en Europa? ¿Los movilizan? Bueno, Verena ha sido movilizada, y este ha sido el cuartel general.

—¿Irá usted esta noche al Music Hall?

—¿Por quién me ha tomado? No tengo ningunas ganas de que me chillen durante una hora.

—No lo dudo, no lo dudo; ya me imagino cuál ha de ser el estado de ánimo de la señorita Olive —continuó Ransom con expresión ausente. Luego dijo crudamente y en otro tono—: Si esta casa ha sido, como dice usted, el cuartel general, ¿cómo es posible entonces que no la haya visto?

—¿Que no haya visto a Olive? ¡Pero si no he visto otra cosa!

—No; me refiero a la señorita Tarrant. Debe de encontrarse en algún lugar de la ciudad, si es cierto que la conferencia va a llevarse a cabo esta noche.

—¿Me está pidiendo acaso que salga a buscarla? *Il ne manquerait plus que celà!* —exclamó la señora Luna—. ¿Qué es lo que le pasa, Basil Ransom, y qué es lo que desea de mí? —le preguntó con decidida aspereza.

Había tratado de hablarle con altivez, había intentado también ser humilde, pero se había encontrado con un contrincante al que no podía tomar en serio, y que sin embargo no era menos reprensible por ello.

No sé si Ransom habría intentado responder a su pregunta de no haberse interpuesto en ese momento un obstáculo; en el momento en que ella estaba hablando, alguien empujó la cortina de la puerta y cruzó el umbral.

—¡Cielo santo, qué impertinencia! —exclamó en voz muy alta la señora Luna; y sin moverse de su sitio le dirigió una mirada nada hospitalaria al visitante, un caballero a quien Ransom le parecía haber ya visto en otra ocasión.

Era un joven de rostro fresco y abundante melena, prematuramente encanecida; le sonrió a la señora Luna, impertérrito ante la ausencia de cualquier demostración amistosa. Ella lo miró como si no lo conociera, y Ransom se dispuso a partir, dejándolos en libertad de arreglar sus asuntos.

—Temo que no se acuerde usted de mí, aunque ya nos hemos visto antes —dijo el joven muy amablemente—. Estuve aquí hace una semana, y la señorita Chancellor nos presentó.

—Sí, sí; ahora no se encuentra en casa —respondió vagamente la señora Luna.

—Eso me han dicho, pero para mí no es problema. —Y el joven abarcó también a Basil Ransom en la sonrisa con que deseaba forzar una bienvenida que la señora Luna parecía decidida a negarle, y con la cual trataba de implicar cierta superioridad—. Hay un asunto sobre el que me gustaría muchísimo obtener alguna información, y no dudo que usted será lo suficientemente gentil como para ofrecérmela.

—Me parece recordar que tiene usted algo que ver con la prensa —dijo la señora Luna, y en ese momento también Ransom ubicó al joven en sus recuerdos.

Había estado presente en la famosa reunión de la señorita Birdseye, y la doctora Prance lo había descrito entonces como un periodista brillante.

Aceptó la definición de la señora Luna con el aire de ser un gran personaje, y continuó dirigiendo sus rayos hacia Ransom (como si también él, a su vez, hubiera recordado su cara), mientras confidencialmente dejaba caer una palabra que parecía tener un significado especial:

—*The Vesper*, ¿sabe usted? —Y luego continuó—: Pues bien, señora Luna, la verdad es que no estoy dispuesto a dejarla escapar. Queremos saber las últimas noticias sobre Verena Tarrant, y es de aquí de donde deben salir.

—¡Maldición! —masculló Ransom, y se apresuró a recoger su sombrero.

—¿Dónde la ha escondido la señorita Chancellor? Hemos rastreado la ciudad en su búsqueda, su propio padre dice no haberla visto durante una semana. Nos ha expresado sus ideas, son muy fáciles de obtener, pero no es eso lo que nos interesa.

—¿Y qué es lo que quiere usted? —Ransom se sintió obligado a intervenir, ya que el señor Pardon (había recordado de pronto su nombre) parecía haber expresado claramente sus intenciones.

—Queremos saber cómo se siente antes de su presentación; cuál es su estado de ánimo, sus previsiones; qué aspecto tiene, qué vestido lleva a las seis de la tarde. ¡Por el amor de Dios! Si pudiera verlo podría saber lo que quiero, y también ella, me imagino —exclamó el señor Pardon—. Usted debe de saber algo, señora Luna; no es posible que no lo sepa. No insistiré en saber dónde se halla, si ella quiere permanecer a solas, aunque a mi parecer comete un error; ¡podríamos trabajar en su favor durante estas últimas horas! ¿No me podría proporcionar algunos detalles personales, del tipo que a la gente le gusta conocer? ¿Qué es lo que va a cenar esta noche…? ¿O es que hablará… sin haber comido antes?

—Realmente, señor, no lo sé, y no me interesa en lo más mínimo; ¡nada tengo que ver en este asunto! —gritó la señora Luna, enfurecida.

El periodista se la quedó mirando a los ojos; luego añadió apresuradamente:

—¿Así que no tiene usted nada que ver? ¿Sus puntos de vista son opuestos? ¿Protesta usted contra este acto? —Y ya se estaba buscando en el bolsillo su cuaderno de notas.

—¡Que Dios nos libre! ¿Va usted a escribir eso en su periódico? —exclamó la señora Luna, y a pesar de la sensación, detestable para él, de que todo aquello de que quería librar a la muchacha estaba acercándose, Ransom soltó una cínica carcajada.

—¡Ah, usted protesta, señora!, permítame por lo menos saber por qué razones —continuó el señor Pardon—. Una protesta que surge de esta casa sería una noticia encantadora. Debemos tenerla, a falta de otra cosa. El público se interesa tanto en su hermana como en la señorita Verena: sabe cómo la ha apoyado, y para mí significaría una fortuna (¡ya puedo ver el titular, y es muy atractivo!) poder anunciar: «Lo que piensa la familia de la señorita Chancellor al respecto».

La señora Luna se dejó caer en la silla más próxima con un gemido, y se cubrió la cara con las manos.

—¡Que Dios me ayude! ¡Me siento feliz de poder marcharme a Europa!

—Esa es otra buena noticia… Todo cuenta —dijo Matthias Pardon, tomando apuntes en su cuaderno—. ¿Me podría informar si se va usted a Europa como protesta contra las opiniones de su hermana?

La señora Luna se levantó nuevamente y le arrancó el cuaderno de las manos.

—Si tiene usted el descaro de publicar una sola palabra sobre mí o mencionar aunque sea mi nombre en su periódico, iré a la redacción y mostraré un gran escándalo.

—Mi querida señora, esa sería una fortuna llovida del cielo —exclamó el señor Pardon con entusiasmo; pero de todos modos se guardó la libreta en el bolsillo.

—¿Ha buscado usted exhaustivamente a la señorita Tarrant? —preguntó Basil Ransom; y ante aquellas palabras el señor Pardon lo contempló con aire de desconfianza, como si aquel hombre representara a la competencia—. No debe usted temer; no soy. periodista —concluyó.

—No lo sé. ¿Por qué ha venido entonces desde Nueva York?

—No como representante de un periódico.

—Es posible que él lo conduzca —murmuró la señora Luna con indignación.

—Sí, he estado en todos los sitios imaginables —comentó el señor Pardon—. He andado detrás del empresario de su hermana, pero no he logrado hablar con él; pienso que también él por su parte ha tratado de localizar a la señorita Tarrant. La señorita Chancellor me dijo, tal vez la señora Luna lo recuerda, que no estaría aquí durante la semana, y que prefería no decirme dónde ni cómo iba a pasar el tiempo hasta el momento de la presentación. Por supuesto yo le dije que lograría descubrir su paradero, y debe usted recordar —se volvió a dirigir a la señora Luna— la conversación que

tuvimos al respecto. Yo le hice saber con la mejor buena fe que no debían exagerar en el silencio. El señor Tarrant también se ha sentido muy desilusionado. Sin embargo yo he hecho todo lo que he podido con el material a mi alcance, y *The Vesper* ha informado a su público de que el escondite de la señorita Tarrant constituye el misterio más profundo de la temporada. Es difícil huir de *The Vesper*.

—Casi tengo miedo de abrir la boca en su presencia —lo interrumpió la señora Luna —, pero debo decir que creo que mi hermana fue extremadamente comunicativa. Le dijo a usted mucho más de lo que yo me hubiera atrevido.

—Me gustaría probarle a usted con algo que sé que usted conoce —respondió Matthias Pardon con expresión imperturbable—. La misma señorita Chancellor ha cambiado de ideas considerablemente; hace un año o dos era del todo inaccesible. ¿Si la he ablandado a ella por qué no podría ablandarla a usted? Ella sabe que ahora puedo ayudarla; y como no soy rencoroso estoy dispuesto a ayudarla en todo lo que me permita. El problema es que me lo permite en muy escasa medida; parece no creer en mí. De cualquier modo —prosiguió, dirigiéndose sobre todo a Ransom—, hace apenas media hora en el Music Hall seguían sin saber nada sobre la señorita Tarrant aparte de que hace un mes estuvo allí con la señorita Chancellor, hizo pruebas de voz, vio que resonaba en toda la sala, como si fuera de plata, y que la señorita Chancellor garantizó una absoluta puntualidad para esta noche.

—Bueno, eso es todo lo que se necesita —dijo Ransom, al azar, y le tendió la mano en señal de despedida a la señora Luna.

—¿Me abandona usted ya? —le preguntó, lanzándole una mirada que hubiera hecho sentir mal a cualquier espectador que no fuera un reportero de *The Vesper*.

—Tengo aún cincuenta cosas que hacer; debe usted excusarme. —Se sentía nervioso, inquieto, su corazón latía más aceleradamente que de costumbre; no podía permanecer quieto, y no tenía ningún escrúpulo por dejarla abandonada para que se defendiera por su cuenta del señor Pardon.

Este continuó la conversación, posiblemente esperando que en cualquier momento la señorita Chancellor y la señorita Tarrant hicieran acto de aparición.

—Han agotado todas las localidades; se espera una multitud inmensa. ¡Cuando al público de Boston se le mete algo en la cabeza…! —exclamó el señor Pardon.

Ransom deseaba únicamente retirarse, y a fin de facilitar las cosas, como si quisiera implicar un deseo de volver a verla, le dijo hipócritamente a la señora Luna desde el umbral de la puerta:

—Debería usted ir esta noche.

—Yo no soy como el público de Boston. ¡Hay cosas que no me entran en la cabeza! —respondió.

—¿Quiere decir que no va a ir? —gritó el señor Pardon, con los ojos enteramente abiertos, y metiéndose de nuevo las manos en los bolsillos—. ¿No la considera usted un genio extraordinario?

La señora Luna se hallaba en extremo fatigada, y la vejación que significaba ver partir a Ransom con el pensamiento fijo sin duda alguna en Verena, dejándola en manos de aquel detestable periodista, cuya presencia le impedía protestar con vehemencia, la rabia de advertir que todo y todos se mofaban de ella fue tal que al final perdió los estribos y respondió iracundamente:

—Por supuesto que no. ¡Pienso que es una vulgar idiota!

—¡Ah, señora, nunca me permitiría publicar eso! —fueron las últimas palabras que Ransom oyó mientras cerraba la puerta del salón.

XLI

Ransom paseó durante las dos horas siguientes por todo Boston, sin preocuparse de la dirección que debía a seguir, consciente solo de que le resultaría imposible volver a su hotel o comer algo o descansar sus fatigados miembros. Había vagado de la misma manera desesperada, ansioso y a la vez sin objetivo durante muchos días antes de abandonar Nueva York y sabía que su agitación e incertidumbre estaban a punto de terminar. Sin embargo en esos momentos lo oprimían más que nunca; se habían vuelto tremendamente agudas. Las primeras sombras crepusculares de la última mitad de noviembre habían comenzado a caer; sin embargo, la noche era límpida y las calles iluminadas tenían la animación y la variedad de un invierno que había empezado con gran brillo. Los aparadores de las tiendas brillaban a través de los cristales helados, los peatones iban y venían apresuradamente por las aceras, las campanillas de los tranvías tintineaban en el aire helado, los vendedores de periódicos pregonaban con voces ásperas las noticias del día, los vestíbulos de los teatros, iluminados y con las paredes cubiertas de carteles y fotografías de actrices, mostraban de un modo seductor sus puertas batientes recubiertas de cuero rojo o tapete salpicadas de pequeñas placas metálicas. Detrás de amplios ventanales de cristal se veía el interior de los hoteles, con sus salones pavimentados de mármol, sus lámparas eléctricas, sus columnas y la gente del Oeste sentada en los divanes, con las piernas cruzadas, mientras que detrás de un mostrador, cubierto con pilas de revistas y novelas, unos jovenzuelos con cara de ancianos mostraban las guías de los teatros, ofrecían programas y vendían localidades. Cuando de vez en cuando Ransom se detenía en una esquina, dudaba qué camino tomar, contemplaba las estrellas, claras y cercanas, que cintilaban sobre la ciudad. Boston le

parecía una ciudad enorme y con una activa vida nocturna, muy despierta y dispuesta a pasar una velada agradable.

Pasó y volvió a pasar frente al Music Hall, vio a Verena ampulosamente anunciada, contempló el panorama, la avenida que conduce hasta School Street, y todo aquello le pareció siniestro. El público no había aún comenzado a entrar, pero el lugar estaba preparado, y el intervalo sería demasiado corto. Así le parecía a Ransom, a la vez que deseaba inmensamente que la crisis hubiera ya tenido lugar. Todo lo que le rodeaba hacía referencia a la idea que palpitaba en su mente: la cuestión de si debía o no intervenir aún para evitar el salto de la joven al abismo. Le parecía que todo Boston iría a escucharla, o al menos todos aquellos a quienes veía por la calle; y había una especie de incentivo e inspiración en aquel pensamiento. La visión de arrancarla de aquella poderosa multitud, de abrirse paso entre la muchedumbre que lucharía por apoderarse de ella, lo volvió a reanimar. No sería demasiado tarde, aunque millares de ojos convergieran en Verena. Había comprado su billete por la mañana. Regresó a su hotel por un momento, el suficiente para arreglarse un poco y refrescarse con un vaso de vino. Luego volvió a dirigirse hacia el Music Hall y vio que la gente había comenzado a entrar, las primeras gotas de la gran corriente, entre las que había muchas mujeres. A partir de las siete los minutos habían transcurrido rápidamente; primero le había parecido que el tiempo no corría y ahora faltaba solo media hora. Ransom entró junto con los demás; sabía perfectamente cuál era su asiento; lo había elegido al llegar a Boston, entre los pocos que quedaban, con mucho cuidado. Pero en esos momentos, mientras permanecía allí bajo el techo de paneles, que se extendía sobre la línea compuesta de pequeñas lenguas de fuego que marcaban su unión con las paredes, se dio cuenta de que no tenía ninguna importancia, ya que con toda seguridad no iba a permanecer en su sitio. Él no formaba parte del público; era un individuo aparte, único, y estaba allí atendiendo un asunto personal. No le hubiera siquiera importado no haber reservado con anticipación un asiento si se le hubiera permitido comprar en el último momento un billete para permanecer de pie en los corredores. La gente comenzó a entrar en densas oleadas y dentro de poco tiempo no quedaría un solo asiento vacío. Ransom no tenía un plan definido; había querido más que nada entrar en el edificio, de modo que, ante la contemplación del campo de batalla, pudiera tomar una resolución.

Nunca antes había estado en el Music Hall, y sus palcos elevados y los inmensos balcones impresionaron vivamente su imaginación. Hubo dos o tres momentos durante los cuales se sintió como podía sentirse un joven que en medio de un lugar público ha decidido, por determinadas razones, disparar una pistola contra un rey o un presidente.

El lugar le impresionó por su amplitud romana; las puertas que daban a los corredores de los balcones superiores, que se abrían y cerraban constantemente dando paso a los espectadores y a los acomodadores, le recordaban los *vomitoria* sobre los que había leído en una descripción del Coliseo. El inmenso órgano al fondo del escenario, ocupado con filas de asientos para los coros y para las autoridades municipales, elevaba hacia la cúpula sus tubos brillantes y sus pináculos esculpidos, y algunos genios de la música o de la oratoria se erguían en el bronce monumental de la base. La sala tenía una capacidad tal y un aire tan solemne, y el auditorio crecía tan rápidamente, que Ransom calculó el número de individuos que podría contener cuando estuviese totalmente llena, y el valor de aquellas dos jóvenes, enfrentadas a una prueba tan tremenda, apareció ante él como algo realmente sublime, especialmente la consciente tensión de la pobre Olive, a quien no se le ahorraría ninguna de las ansiedades y temores, ninguno de los posibles accidentes y ningún cálculo de un posible fracaso. En la parte exterior del escenario había un alto escritorio, semejante al pódium de un director de orquesta, cubierto de terciopelo rojo, y junto a él una ligera silla ornamental, en la que estaba seguro que no habría de sentarse Verena, aunque con seguridad se apoyaría en determinados momentos en el respaldo. Detrás había una especie de semicírculo con una docena de sillones, que evidentemente habían sido colocados allí para los amigos de la conferenciante, sus espónsors y patrocinadores. El salón comenzó a llenarse de sonidos premonitorios; personas que hacían ruido al bajar los asientos, y muchachos que pregonaban: «¡Fotografías de la señorita Tarrant… una semblanza de su vida!» o «¡Retratos de la oradora… historia de su carrera!», que se perdían en aquella inmensidad. Antes de que Ransom se hubiera dado cuenta, varios de los sillones del fondo, detrás del escritorio de la conferenciante, fueron ocupados, y en cierto momento reconoció, a pesar de la distancia, a algunas de las personas que aparecieron. La mujer de porte erguido, con bandas de cabello brillante y cejas espesas que se percibían a distancia, no podía ser sino la señora Farrinder, mientras que el

caballero sentado a su lado, con un abrigo blanco, un paraguas y una cara inexpresiva, era probablemente su marido, Amariah. En el extremo opuesto de la fila había otra pareja que Ransom, poco familiarizado con varios capítulos de la historia de Verena, advirtió sin sorpresa que eran la señora Burrage y su apuesto hijo. Por lo visto su interés por la señorita Tarrant no había sido solo un incidente momentáneo, ya que, al igual que él, habían hecho el viaje desde Nueva York para escucharla. Aquí y allá había otras personas desconocidas para nuestro joven, en el semicírculo; pero algunos de los sitios estaban aún vacíos (uno de los cuales estaría, desde luego, reservado para Olive), y Ransom pensó aun en medio de sus preocupaciones que uno de aquellos lugares debería permanecer así… es decir, vacío, para simbolizar la presencia espiritual de la señorita Birdseye.

Compró una de las fotografías de Verena y la encontró desagradablemente mala, y compró también la semblanza de su vida (que muchas personas parecían estar leyendo en esos momentos), pero la guardó en el bolsillo para leerla después. Verena no estaba de ninguna manera presente para él en aquel despliegue mercantil y publicitario; a quien vio fue a Olive, luchando y sucumbiendo, haciendo todos los sacrificios hasta obtener el mayor auditorio de la ciudad, y cediendo a las peticiones de los grandes medios publicitarios. Si había luchado o no, lo cierto era que se producía un efecto de caza de dinero en todo aquel asunto que le hizo sentir las mejillas afiebradas y desear tener el dinero suficiente como para comprarle a todos aquellos muchachos vociferantes sus panfletos y fotografías. De repente las notas del órgano se expandieron por la sala, y se dio cuenta de que el preludio había comenzado. También eso le pareció un efecto barato, pero ya no esperó a considerar más tiempo sobre el particular; se levantó instantáneamente de su asiento (que había elegido al extremo de una fila) y llegó a una de las numerosas puertas. Aunque no se había trazado un plan definitivo tenía ahora por lo menos un impulso irresistible y sintió un ápice de vergüenza por haber titubeado durante un minuto. Había calculado que Verena, aún envuelta en los velos de misterio con que la cubría su compañera, no llegaría al escenario sino unos cuantos minutos antes de que llegara el momento de su presentación, así que no había perdido nada al esperar frente al escenario. Pero debía aprovechar ya la oportunidad. Antes de pasar de la sala al corredor se detuvo, y dando

la espalda al escenario lanzó una mirada al público que se había congregado. Era extraordinariamente numeroso, y, bañado por la luz difusa de las lámparas de gas que caía desde una gran altura, inmerso en la densa atmósfera que se crea en tales lugares, parecía elevarse hacia lo alto en una compacta y formidable expectación. Ransom sintió un estremecimiento de inquietud ante su secreto propósito de quererlo privar de su entretenimiento, de su víctima; tuvo una vislumbre de la ferocidad latente siempre en una multitud que se siente engañada. Pero el pensamiento de aquel peligro solo le hizo apresurar el paso por aquellos feos corredores; sentía que su plan era en esos momentos bastante definido, y advirtió que ni siquiera necesitaba preguntar el camino para llegar a cierta puertecita (una o más de una) que intentaría abrir. Al comprar su entrada esa mañana se había asegurado de qué lado del escenario estaba situado el camerino de los cantantes y oradores y había elegido su asiento en aquella parte, así que no necesitó caminar demasiado para encontrarla. Nadie se interpuso en su camino, ni lo interrogó; los espectadores de la señorita Tarrant continuaban llegando a la sala (la ocasión debía de constituir, evidentemente, un triunfo sin precedentes), y ocupaban toda la atención de los acomodadores. Ransom abrió una puerta al final de un corredor y entró en una especie de vestíbulo enteramente vacío, salvo que en la segunda puerta, frente a él, se erguía una figura ante cuya vista tuvo que detener el paso. La figura era sencillamente la de un robusto policía, con casco y botones de latón, un policía que lo estaba esperando. Ransom advirtió eso al instante. En ese mismo espacio de tiempo supo que Olive Chancellor debía de haberse enterado de su llegada y había solicitado la protección de aquel funcionario, que estaba sencillamente haciendo la guardia a la entrada y estaba dispuesto a defender el lugar contra cualquier visitante. Había cierto elemento de sorpresa en eso, ya que habría supuesto que su nerviosa prima habría estado ausente de su casa durante todo el día, y lo habría pasado en el escondite de Verena. Sin embargo, la sorpresa no fue tanta como para interrumpir su camino por más de un instante; cruzó la habitación y se detuvo frente al centinela. Por un segundo ninguno de los dos habló; se miraron uno a otro con dureza, mientras Ransom oía el órgano más allá de la pared que lanzaba sus ondas sonoras por toda la sala. Parecían resonar muy cerca y todo el lugar vibraba. El policía era un hombre alto, de rostro anguloso y amarillento, con los hombros un poco caídos, y algo en la boca que le

formaba una protuberancia en una mejilla. Ransom pudo ver de una simple ojeada que era un hombre muy fuerte, pero él no se consideraba menos. Sin embargo, no había ido allí para ofrecer una exhibición pugilística; un combate público por Verena no resultaba una idea atractiva, excepto, tal vez, después de todo, si él salía perdiendo, desde el punto de vista del nuevo sistema publicitario adoptado por Olive. Seguía sin decir nada, y el policía permanecía mudo, y había algo en el modo en que transcurría el tiempo y en la sensación que experimentaba nuestro joven de que Verena estaba separada solo por un par de ligeras paredes de madera, que le hizo sentir que también ella lo esperaba, pero en otro sentido; ella no tenía nada que ver con aquel despliegue de fuerza pública; ella sabría en un momento, por un golpe de intuición, que él estaba allí; se hallaba rezando para que llegara a rescatarla, a salvarla. Si Verena se hubiera tenido que enfrentar con Olive le habría faltado el valor, pero lo tendría si él llegaba a poner una mano sobre las suyas. Se le ocurrió que en ese momento no había en el mundo nadie tan inseguro con todo ese asunto como Olive Chancellor; era como si pudiera ver, a través de la puerta, el terrible modo en que los ojos de esta se fijaban en Verena, con el reloj en una mano, mientras la muchacha trataba de apartar la vista. Olive se habría sentido satisfecha si la joven hubiese podido comenzar antes de tiempo, pero por supuesto aquello era imposible. Ransom no hizo ninguna pregunta, le parecía una pérdida de tiempo; solamente le dijo, después de una breve pausa, al policía:

—Me es necesario ver a la señorita Tarrant. ¿Sería tan amable de entregarle mi tarjeta?

El encargado de mantener el orden, bien plantado entre él y el pomo de la puerta, tomó de la mano de Ransom el cartoncillo, leyó atentamente el nombre que estaba escrito, le dio la vuelta y miró la otra cara; luego se lo devolvió a su interlocutor con estas palabras:

—Mire, creo que no le será de ninguna utilidad —observó.

—¿Cómo puede usted saberlo? No le compete negarse a mi solicitud.

—Tampoco creo que a usted le competa entrar aquí. —Luego añadió—: Usted es precisamente la persona a quien tengo órdenes de no permitirle el paso.

—No creo que la señorita Tarrant me haya prohibido el paso —repuso Ransom.

—No sé lo que piensa, pero no es ella quien ha alquilado el local, sino la otra… la señorita Chancellor. Ella es quien organiza esta conferencia.

—¿Y ha dado órdenes de que se me impida pasar? ¡Qué absurdo! —exclamó Ransom con indignación.

—Me dijo que usted no debería rondar por aquí; que tiene algo en mente Creo que lo mejor será que esté tranquilo —dijo el policía.

—¿Tranquilo? ¿Es posible estar más tranquilo de lo que estoy ahora?

—He visto a muchos locos que se le parecían bastante. Si quiere ver a la oradora, ¿por qué no va usted a la sala como el resto del público?

Y el policía lo observó con actitud meditativa y serena en espera de una respuesta a su pregunta.

Ransom tuvo una a su disposición inmediatamente.

—Porque no quiero solo verla; también quiero hablarle… en privado.

—Claro, siempre se trata de algo estrictamente privado —dijo el policía—; mire, si yo fuera usted volvería a la sala y no me perdería la conferencia. Podría jurar que le va a sentar bien.

—¿La conferencia? —repitió Ransom riéndose—. La conferencia sencillamente no tendrá lugar.

—La conferencia empezará tan pronto como el órgano deje de tocar. —Luego el policía añadió, como para sí mismo—: ¿Por qué diablos no iba a tener lugar?

—Porque la señorita Tarrant ha mandado que le dijesen al organista que siguiera tocando.

—¿A quién piensa usted que ha mandado? —Y el nuevo conocido de Ransom añadió con cierto humor—: Me parece que la señorita Chancellor no es su negra.

—Ha enviado a su padre, o tal vez a su madre. Ambos están también allí.

—¿Cómo sabe eso? —preguntó el policía, pensativo.

—Oh, lo sé todo —respondió Ransom sonriendo.

—Bueno, me parece que la gente no ha venido aquí para oír ese órgano. Si dentro de poco no para, vamos a tener oportunidad de oír otras cosas.

—Muy pronto va usted a oír muchas cosas —corroboró Ransom.

La serenidad de su confianza pareció impresionar al final a su antagonista, quien movió la cabeza un poco, como un animal dispuesto a dar coces, y miró al joven bajo sus espesas cejas.

—Bueno, ya he oído muchas cosas desde que llegué a Boston.

—Oh, Boston es una gran ciudad —añadió Ransom sin poner atención.

Había dejado de escuchar al policía y al órgano, pues en esos momentos le llegó el sonido de voces procedentes del otro lado de la puerta. El policía se apoyó en el marco de la puerta con los brazos cruzados. Se produjo otra pausa, durante la cual cesó el sonido del órgano.

—Esperaré aquí con su permiso —dijo Ransom—. Tengo la seguridad de que me llamarán.

—¿Quién supone usted que va a llamarlo?

—Espero que la señorita Tarrant.

—Primero ella tendrá que darle explicaciones a la otra.

Ransom sacó su reloj, que varias horas antes había sincronizado con la hora de Boston, y se dio cuenta de que durante ese diálogo los minutos habían corrido con creciente velocidad, y que ahora marcaba las ocho y cinco.

—La señorita Chancellor será quien tenga que darle explicaciones al público —dijo; y sus palabras estaban lejos de ser una profesión de vacua autoconfianza, pues tenía la convicción de que se estaba desarrollando un drama, en el que él, aunque ausente, era el protagonista, dentro del camerino al que le impedían entrar; y que la situación era extraordinariamente tensa y que no se resolvería hasta que lo llamaran; esta suposición trascendental adquirió una fuerza mayor en el instante en que advirtió que Verena mantenía al público a la espera. ¿Por qué entonces no aparecía? ¿Por qué, si no era porque sabía que él estaba allí y deseaba ganar tiempo?

—Bueno, creo que ya ha salido a escena —dijo el guardián, cuya discusión con Ransom parecía haber pasado por su parte, y sin ceder en lo más mínimo en cuanto a firmeza, a una fase sociable.

—Si hubiera salido habríamos escuchado ya el recibimiento, los aplausos del público.

—Eso es precisamente lo que están haciendo —anunció el policía.

Era detestable reconocer que tenía razón, ya que parecía que recibían con una salva de aplausos a Verena. Un estruendo surgía desde la platea hasta la galería superior: el sonido de varios miles de personas que, puestos de pie, golpeaban el suelo con sus paraguas y bastones. Ransom se sintió desfallecer, y durante un breve instante miró fijamente a los ojos del policía. Luego, recuperando la frialdad, exclamó:

—Mi querido amigo, no se trata de aplausos… sino de una manifestación de impaciencia. No es un recibimiento sino una llamada a escena.

El policía ni asintió a su interpretación ni la negó; pasó solo la protuberancia de una mejilla a la otra, y luego observó:

—Tal vez esté enferma.

—¡Espero que no! —dijo Ransom en tono afectuoso.

El estruendo prosiguió durante un minuto y luego cesó, pero antes de que aquello ocurriera, la observación de Ransom había demostrado ser acertada. El tono de aquella manifestación no carecía de cierto humor, pero implicaba impaciencia. Ransom miró nuevamente su reloj, vio que habían transcurrido otros cinco minutos y recordó que el periodista había dicho algo en la casa de Charles Street sobre el hecho de que Olive se había hecho responsable de la puntualidad de Verena. De un modo bastante extraño, en el momento en que la imagen de aquel caballero se presentó en su mente, el mismo, en persona, entraba apresuradamente por la otra puerta, en un estado de viva agitación.

—¿Por qué, en nombre del cielo, no comienza? Si quiere que el público la llame, ya lo ha logrado.

El señor Pardon miró a Ransom, luego al policía, y nuevamente al primero, y en su preocupación no daba muestras de haber visto nunca antes al joven de Mississippi.

—Me imagino que se habrá sentido mal —dijo el policía.

—¡Va a ser el público quien se sentirá mal! —gritó el infeliz periodista—. Si se ha enfermado, ¿por qué no llaman a un médico? Todo Boston ha acudido al teatro, de modo que debe hablar. Debo entrar a verla.

—No puede usted pasar —dijo el policía, secamente.

—Me gustaría saber por qué no puedo pasar. Soy reportero de *The Vesper*.

—No puede usted entrar, no me importa de dónde venga. Tampoco a este señor le he permitido pasar —añadió el policía cordialmente, como para que la exclusión del

señor Pardon resultara menos irritante.

—¡Cómo! ¡No es posible que no le hayan dejado entrar! —dijo el señor Pardon mirando a Ransom con asombro.

—Tal vez hubieran debido dejarlo pasar; pero no ha sido así —dijo el policía con socarronería.

—¡Cielo santo! —dijo entre jadeos el señor Pardon—. Estaba seguro desde el principio de que la señorita Chancellor no haría sino confundirlo todo. ¿Dónde está el señor Filer? —añadió ansiosamente, dirigiéndose aparentemente a uno y a otro de los presentes, o a ambos.

—Me imagino que estará en la puerta, haciendo las cuentas —dijo el policía.

—Tendrá que devolver el dinero si no se arregla esto pronto.

—Tal vez tenga que hacerlo. Si viene lo dejaré entrar, pero solo *a él*. Ya ha salido al escenario… —añadió el policía sin mostrar ninguna emoción.

Su oído había percibido el primer débil murmullo de una nueva explosión de sonidos. Esta vez, sin lugar a duda, se trataba de un aplauso… un aplauso repetido por infinidad de manos, mezclado con el grito de muchas gargantas. Sin embargo aquella demostración, aunque considerable, no era todo lo que se podía haber esperado, y se extinguió rápidamente. El señor Pardon escuchaba, con cierta expresión de alarma en el rostro.

—¡Misericordia divina! ¿Es posible que la reciban tan fríamente? —gritó—. Voy a ver qué ocurre.

En cuanto Pardon desapareció, Ransom le preguntó al policía:

—¿Quién es el señor Filer?

—Ah, un viejo amigo mío. Es el hombre que maneja a la señorita Chancellor.

—¿Que la maneja?

—Exactamente igual que ella maneja a la señorita Tarrant. Las maneja a ambas, mejor dicho. Su negocio consiste en organizar conferencias.

—Entonces, lo mejor que podría hacer sería salir y hablarle al público.

—¡No sabe hablar, lo único que sabe es mandar!

La puerta de enfrente volvió a abrirse de nuevo en ese momento y un hombre corpulento y de aspecto acalorado, con una pequeña perilla en el mentón y la gabardina

moviéndose agitadamente tras él, apareció lanzando una imprecación:

—¿Qué diablos es lo que hacen en el camerino? ¡La cosa ya no está para jueguecitos!

—¿No ha salido al escenario todavía? —preguntó el policía.

—No es la señorita Tarrant —dijo Ransom, como si supiera todo lo que ocurría.

En un momento pudo descubrir que aquel hombre era el señor Filer, el empresario de Olive Chancellor; e inmediatamente se le ocurrió que aquel personaje debía estar prevenido contra él por su prima y trataría indudablemente de impedirle la entrada, haciéndolo responsable, a él o a su influencia, de la inexplicable demora de Verena. Sin embargo el señor Filer solo lo miró, y, con gran sorpresa de Ransom, pareció no tener ninguna idea de su identidad; lo que implicaba que la señorita Chancellor había considerado más discreto no hablarle a nadie de él, con la única excepción del policía.

—¿Al escenario? Es ese asno que tiene por padre el que está en el escenario —gritó el señor Filer, con la mano en el pomo de la puerta, a la cual el policía le había permitido aproximarse.

—¿Está preguntando si hay un doctor entre el público? —preguntó el policía desapasionadamente.

—¡Usted va a ser la clase de doctor que él va a necesitar si no logra que aparezca la muchacha! ¿No me querrá decir que siguen encerradas? Pero ¿qué es lo que les pasa?

—Se han encerrado con llave —dijo el policía, mientras el señor Filer descargaba sobre la puerta una andanada de golpes secos, a la vez que movía el pomo con todas sus fuerzas.

—Si la puerta estaba cerrada con llave, ¿qué sentido tenía que se apostara usted aquí? —preguntó Ransom.

—Precisamente para que no pudiera usted hacer eso. —Y el policía señaló al señor Filer.

—Como puede ver, su intervención no ha servido de nada.

—No lo sé; ella tiene que salir aún.

Mientras tanto el señor Filer continuaba golpeando la puerta, exigiendo que se le admitiera de inmediato y preguntando si se proponían que el público destroza el teatro. Otra oleada de aplausos había estallado ante las disculpas o alguna solemne petición de paciencia dirigida por Selah Tarrant; esto amortiguó el sonido de la voz del agente, así

como las confusas voces procedentes del camerino. Durante un minuto no se oyó nada claro; la puerta permaneció cerrada. Matthias Pardon reapareció en el vestíbulo.

—Le ha dicho al público que la muchacha se encuentra un poco débil… por la tensión nerviosa. Que aparecerá dentro de unos tres minutos.

Ese anuncio fue la contribución del señor Pardon a la crisis; añadió que aquella multitud era encantadora, que era el verdadero público de Boston; habían acogido las palabras del padre con la mejor disposición.

—También aquí dentro hay un público encantador, verdadera gente de Boston, según me parece —gritó el señor Filer, golpeando con mayor vehemencia en ese momento—. He tenido que lidiar con *prima donnas,* me las he visto con fenómenos de la naturaleza, pero nunca había conocido nada semejante. Tengan presente lo que les digo, señoras; si no me dejan entrar derribaré la puerta.

—Me parece que usted no lo hubiera hecho peor —le dijo el policía a Ransom, con el aire de quien ya en ese momento comprende la inutilidad de sus funciones.

XLII

Ransom no respondió nada; observaba fijamente la puerta, que en aquel momento alguien abrió desde el interior. Allí estaba Verena… ella había abierto… y sus ojos se dirigieron directamente a él. Iba vestida de blanco; su rostro estaba más blanco aún que el vestido, su cabello parecía resplandecer como el fuego. Dio un paso adelante, pero antes de que diera el siguiente él había llegado hasta ella, en el umbral de la puerta. La expresión del rostro de la joven era de intenso sufrimiento, y él no trató, frente a todas aquellas miradas, de tomarle las manos; solo le dijo en voz muy baja:

—Te he estado esperando… durante mucho tiempo.

—Lo sé… Te vi en la sala… Quiero hablar contigo.

—Bueno, señorita Tarrant, ¿no cree usted que sería mejor que hablara desde el escenario? —gritó el señor Filer, haciendo un gesto con ambos brazos como si fuera a transportarla en brazos desde el camerino y depositarla ante el público.

—En un momento estaré lista. Mi padre lo ha arreglado todo. —Y, para sorpresa de Ransom, sonrió con toda su dulzura al furibundo empresario, como si quisiera en verdad tranquilizarlo.

Los tres entraron en la salita de espera, y allí, en el extremo opuesto, más allá de una serie de sillas y mesas vulgares y mediocres bajo la lámpara de gas, pudo ver a la señora Tarrant sentada, muy erguida, en un sofá, con una rigidez absoluta, el amplio rostro contrahecho por el dolor, y a su lado, postrada, desplomada, con la cabeza sepultada en el regazo de la madre de Verena, la trágica figura de Olive Chancellor. Ransom difícilmente podía saber hasta qué punto el abandono de Olive en el regazo de la señora Tarrant era el resultado de la convulsa escena que acababa de tener lugar a puerta cerrada. Cerró nuevamente la puerta con violencia en la cara misma del

periodista y el policía, en el instante en que Selah Tarrant aparecía por el corredor que comunicaba con el escenario, después de su breve contacto con el público. Al ver a Ransom se detuvo de golpe, y recogiéndose los faldones del impermeable, evaluó con la mirada al joven de la cabeza a los pies.

—Bueno, señor, tal vez *usted* querrá subir a explicarle al público nuestro contratiempo —comentó con una sonrisa tan amplia que parecía que las comisuras de su boca iban a encontrarse detrás de la cabeza—. Supongo que usted, mejor que nadie, podrá darle al público una visión interna de nuestras dificultades.

—Padre, ten calma, todo se arreglará dentro de un momento —exclamó Verena, conteniendo el aliento, jadeando como un buceador que sale a la superficie.

—Hay solo una cosa que me gustaría saber: ¿vamos a pasar media hora hablando de nuestros problemas domésticos? —preguntó el señor Filer, secándose el sudor del rostro indignado—. ¿Va a presentarse ante el público la señorita Tarrant o no? Si no lo va a hacer, me gustaría que explicara el porqué. ¿Se da acaso cuenta de que cada cuarto de segundo cuesta en estos momentos alrededor de quinientos dólares?

—Lo sé, lo sé, señor Filer, comenzaré dentro de un momento —continuó Verena—. Solo quiero que se me permita intercambiar unas palabras con el señor Ransom. El público está perfectamente tranquilo… ¿no ve usted con qué tranquilidad espera? Confían en mí, confían en mí, ¿no es cierto, papá? Solo quiero hablar con el señor Ransom.

—¿Y quién diablos es el señor Ransom? —gritó el exasperado señor Filer, completamente fuera de sí.

Verena hablaba con los otros, pero con la mirada fija en su enamorado, y la expresión de sus ojos era inefablemente conmovedora e implorante. Temblaba con pasión nerviosa, en su voz había sollozos y súplicas, y Ransom se sintió inflamado por una oleada de auténtica piedad por su dolor, por su inevitable agonía. Pero al mismo tiempo tuvo otra percepción que le hizo ahogar cualquier remordimiento; vio que podía hacer lo que quería, que ella le suplicaba, con todo su ser, que la salvara, que en el momento en que él elevara la voz se sometería. Lo que él deseaba, bajo esa luz, flameó ante su vista y desafió toda su virilidad, estimulando su determinación de alcanzar una altura desde la cual desafiar no solo al doctor Tarrant, y al señor Filer, y a Olive, allí,

en su muda y ciega vergüenza, sino a la multitud entera que colmaba la sala, la poderosa multitud que esperaba, con el ánimo suspendido, que por el momento se mantenía tranquila pero que de un momento a otro prorrumpiría en un estallido de cólera; advirtió que todo eso le resultaban cosas pequeñas, superables y de importancia solo momentánea. Basil no acababa de comprender del todo la situación; veía que Verena no se negaba sino que contemporizaba, que el estupor que la dominaba —gracias al cual él podía todavía rescatarla— lo había provocado el hecho de saber que él estaba cerca.

—Vámonos, vámonos de aquí —murmuró él, rápidamente, tendiéndole ambas manos.

Ella tomó una, como si le implorara que le permitiera no consentir.

—¡Oh, déjame hacerlo, déjame hacerlo… por ella, por los demás! ¡Sería demasiado terrible! ¡Es imposible!

—¡Lo que a mí me gustaría saber es por qué el señor Ransom no está en manos de la policía! —gimió la señora Tarrant, desde su sofá.

—Lo he estado, señora, durante el último cuarto de hora. —Ransom era cada vez más consciente de poder dominar la situación solo con mantener su sangre fría. Se inclinó hacia Verena con ternura, sin preocuparse ya de los demás—. Querida, te lo dije, te previne. Te he dejado sola estas diez semanas; pero ¿podías acaso dudar de que vendría? Por nada de este mundo, aunque te ofrecieran millones, te entregues a esa multitud rugiente. No esperes que me importe algo, ni el público ni los demás. ¿Qué les importas tú? Lo único que desean es exhibirte, zarandearte, exprimirte. Tú eres mía, no de ellos.

—Por el amor de Dios, ¿qué es lo que dice ese hombre? ¡Con el público más extraordinario que se haya congregado jamás! ¡La ciudad de Boston entera está bajo este techo entre jadeos! —intervino el señor Filer entre jadeos.

—¡La ciudad de Boston puede irse al diablo! —dijo Ransom.

—El señor Ransom se ha interesado demasiado en mi hija, y no aprueba nuestras opiniones —explicó Selah Tarrant.

—¡Se trata del egoísmo más horrible, maligno e inmoral que haya presenciado en mi vida! —gritó la señora Tarrant.

—¡Egoísmo! Señora Tarrant, ¿supone usted que voy a pretender no ser egoísta?

—¿Quiere usted, entonces, que nos asesine a todos la multitud?

—Pueden devolverles el dinero; ¿no podéis devolver el dinero de las entradas? —exclamó Verena, agitándose frenéticamente alrededor del grupo.

—Verena Tarrant, ¿no estarás queriendo decir que no vas a salir? —chilló su madre.

¡Dios mío! Pensar que iba yo a hacerla sufrir de esta manera, se dijo Ransom para sí; y para poner fin a aquella escena detestable, habría tomado a Verena entre sus brazos y se hubiera lanzado hacia fuera si Olive, al oír las palabras tempestuosas de la señora Tarrant, no se hubiera puesto de pie e interpuesto entre ellos con una fuerza que hizo soltar a la muchacha la mano de Ransom. Para el estupor de este, los ojos que lo miraban desde aquel rostro amedrentado y desfigurado eran, como los de Verena, ojos en los que ardía una súplica tremenda. Hubo un momento en que pareció dispuesta a arrodillarse ante él a fin de que pudiera celebrarse la conferencia.

—Si no está usted de acuerdo con sus ideas, llévela al escenario y continúe la discusión allí; al público le encantará eso. ¡Un espectáculo de primera categoría! —dijo el señor Filer, como si aquella sugerencia tuviera algo de práctica.

—¡Ha preparado un discurso muy hermoso! —comentó Selah, tristemente, como dirigiéndose al grupo en general.

Nadie pareció reparar en aquella observación; en ese momento su esposa volvió a tomar la palabra.

—¡Verena Tarrant, me gustaría poder darte de golpes! ¿Consideras a un hombre como ese un caballero? ¡No sé adónde ha ido a parar el valor de tu padre! ¡No sé cómo le permite permanecer aquí!

Entretanto Olive, literalmente, le suplicaba a su primo:

—Permítale que aparezca esta vez, solo esta vez, para evitarnos la ruina y la vergüenza. ¿No tiene usted ninguna piedad?; ¿quiere que me hagan pedazos? Se trata solamente de una hora. ¿Es que no tiene usted alma?

Aquella cara y aquella voz le resultaban terribles a Ransom; Olive se había colocado junto a Verena, y él podía ver que el sufrimiento de su amada no era nada en comparación con el de la otra.

—¿Por qué por una hora cuando todo es falso y condenable? ¡Una hora puede hacer tanto mal como diez años! Es mía o no lo es, y si es mía lo es por completo.

—¡Suya! ¡Suya! ¡Verena, piensa, piensa por un momento lo que estás haciendo! —gimió Olive inclinándose hacia ella.

El señor Filer estaba ya en ese momento desahogando su irritación con gritos de desaprobación y juramentos, y amenazando a los culpables, Verena y Ransom, con las máximas penas impuestas por la ley. La señora Tarrant estalló en una violenta crisis histérica, mientras Selah daba vueltas por la sala y declaraba que los días felices se alejaban para siempre.

—¿No te das cuenta de lo buenos, lo generosos que son al cedernos todo este tiempo? ¿No piensas que cuando el público se comporta de esta manera, sin hacer el menor ruido durante cinco minutos, merece una recompensa? —preguntó Verena a Ransom, sonriendo de una forma maravillosa.

Nada parecía más tierno, más exquisito que la manera en que ella exponía su petición, en el plano de la más simple caridad, de una bondad para aquel público tan generoso e infantil.

—La señorita Chancellor podrá recompensarlo de la manera que prefiera. Puede devolverles el dinero y hacerles un pequeño regalo.

—¿Dinero y regalos? Me gustaría poder darle un balazo, señor —gritó el señor Filer.

El público había sido realmente muy paciente, y hasta ese momento se había merecido el elogio de Verena; pero ya hacía rato que habían dado las ocho, y algunos síntomas de irritación, gritos y silbidos comenzaron a llegar de la sala. El señor Filer se dirigió al corredor que conducía al escenario, y Selah se precipitó tras él. La señora Tarrant se dejó caer sollozando en el sofá, y Olive, temblorosa en medio de la tormenta, le preguntó a Ransom qué quería que hiciera, qué humillación, qué degradación, qué sacrificio deseaba imponerle.

—Haré cualquier cosa… seré abyecta… seré vil… ¡Morderé el polvo!

—No le pido nada, no tengo nada que ver con usted —dijo Ransom—. Lo único que pido es que no espere de mí que cuando Verena sea mi mujer se la conceda por una o dos horas. ¡Verena —continuó—, todo esto ha terminado, es detestable, es abrumador, es ya demasiado…! ¡Ven, salgamos de aquí lo más pronto posible y luego arreglaremos todo lo demás!

Los esfuerzos del señor Filer y de Selah Tarrant por apaciguar al público no obtuvieron, por lo visto, el éxito esperado; el teatro continuaba protestando, y el volumen del estruendo crecía.

—¡Dejadnos solos! ¡Dejadnos solos por un minuto! —gritó Verena—. Dejad que hable con él y todo se arreglará.

La muchacha se precipitó hacia su madre, la tomó de los brazos, la hizo abandonar el sofá y la condujo hasta la puerta del corredor. La señora Tarrant se volvió a reunir con Olive (el horror de aquella situación tenía por lo menos esa compensación) y, cogidas del brazo, las dos mujeres enajenadas, empujadas por Verena, salieron al vestíbulo, que en ese momento, como Ransom pudo ver, había sido abandonado por el policía y el periodista, quien había salido corriendo hacia donde sus servicios eran más necesarios.

—¡Oh! ¿Por qué has venido… por qué, por qué?

Y Verena se acercó a él con una protesta que era toda, y más que toda, una rendición. Nunca se había entregado tanto a él como en aquella actitud de reproche.

—¿No me esperabas? ¿No tenías la seguridad de que vendría? —le preguntó sonriendo, y esperándola hasta tenerla entre sus brazos.

—No lo sabía… Todo ha sido terrible… ¡tremendo! De pronto te vi en tu asiento, en la sala, cuando entraste. Tan pronto como llegamos, subí las escaleras que conducen al escenario y deambulé por allí con mi padre, y en ese minuto te vi. ¡Me sentí demasiado nerviosa como para hablar! Me era imposible hacerlo mientras tú estuvieras allí. Mi padre no te reconoció y yo no le dije nada, pero Olive lo adivinó todo tan pronto como volví. Se precipitó hacia mí y me miró… ¡no sabes cómo me miró! Y lo comprendió todo. No necesitó ir a asomarse, comenzó también a temblar, y a creer, como yo creía, que estábamos perdidas. ¡Escucha, escucha al público! Ahora quiero que te vayas… te veré mañana, todo el tiempo que quieras. Es todo lo que quiero ahora; si te vas, aún será posible arreglar la función.

A pesar de lo preocupado que estaba Ransom por la idea simple y pura de hacerla salir de aquel lugar, podía advertir, sin embargo, su extraño y conmovedor tono de voz, y su aire de poder realmente convencerlo. Era evidente que Verena había renunciado a todo, a cualquier pretensión de sostener convicciones diferentes a las suyas y de mantener alguna lealtad a la causa de la emancipación femenina; todo esto se había

derrumbado tan pronto como lo sintió acercarse, y le pedía que se marchara como cualquier doncella rendida podía pedirle un favor a su galán. Pero la desgracia de la pobre muchacha era que, hiciera o dijera lo que fuese, tenía solo el efecto de que él se sintiera cada vez más atraído por ella y que la multitud a la cual debía dirigirse le pareciera una chusma feroz.

Ransom no cedió en lo más mínimo a su petición, y sencillamente dijo:

—Con toda seguridad Olive debe haber supuesto, debe haber sabido, que yo vendría.

—Hubiera estado segura si tú no te hubieras comportado de un modo tan inesperadamente tranquilo después de que me marchara de Marmion. Parecía que estabas dispuesto a esperar.

—Así lo estuve durante unas cuantas semanas. Pero todo terminó ayer. El día que me enteré de tu huida me sentí furioso, y durante la semana siguiente hice dos o tres intentos por encontrarte. Luego desistí… Pensé que era mejor. Me di cuenta de que estabas muy bien escondida, estaba determinado a no escribir siquiera. Sentía que podía esperar… aquel último día en Marmion me lo hizo creer. Además, dejarte con ella, durante un breve período, al menos, me parecía más decente. Tal vez ahora me puedas decir dónde estuviste.

—Estuve con mis padres. Esa mañana me envió con ellos, con una carta. No sé qué contenía. Tal vez dinero —dijo Verena, que por lo visto a partir de ese momento no le ocultaría ya nada.

—¿Y adónde te llevaron?

—No lo sé… a varios lugares. En una ocasión estuve en Boston, durante un día; pero pasé todo el tiempo en una carroza. Ellos estaban tan atemorizados como Olive; estaban decididos a salvarme.

—Entonces no te debieron haber traído aquí esta noche. ¿Cómo era posible que dudaras de mí?

—No sé qué pensaba; no sabía, sino hasta el momento en que te vi, que toda la fuerza que había invocado me habría abandonado en un segundo, y que si trataba de hablar, mientras tú estuvieras sentado allí, habría cosechado el más tremendo de los fracasos. Tuvimos aquí una escena terrible… pedí una pausa, el tiempo necesario para recuperarme. Esperamos y esperamos, y cuando te oí hablar en la puerta con el policía

me pareció que todo se había acabado. Pero podré presentarme si tú te marchas. El público ha vuelto a callarse… Papá debe de haber despertado su atención.

—Me parece que sí —exclamó Ransom—. Si la señorita Chancellor le dio órdenes a ese policía de detenerme, es que debía de estar esperándome.

—Eso ocurrió después de que supiera que estuviste en su casa. Corrió hasta la entrada del teatro con mi padre, encontraron al policía y lo colocaron allí. Fue ella quien cerró la puerta, parecía creer que ibas a derrumbarla. Yo no esperaba eso, pero desde el momento en que supe que estabas al otro lado ya no pude salir… me sentí paralizada. Me ha hecho sentir mejor hablar contigo; ahora podré presentarme —añadió Verena.

—Mi querida niña, ¿no tienes un chal o un mantón? —fue la única respuesta de Ransom.

Luego él vio sobre una silla una larga capa forrada de piel, la tomó y, antes de que ella hubiera podido oponer la menor resistencia, se la puso sobre los hombros. Verena le permitió abotonársela y, envuelta en ella de la cabeza a los pies, se conformó con decir, después de un momento:

—No comprendo… ¿adónde vamos…? ¿Adónde me llevarás?

—Debemos tomar el tren de la noche para Nueva York, y la primera cosa que haremos mañana temprano será casarnos.

Verena se le quedó mirando con la sorpresa fija en los ojos.

—Tu padre está dejando de interesarlos. Comenzarán a aullar y a patear, de acuerdo con su naturaleza.

—¡Su naturaleza es magnífica! —dijo casi suplicante Verena.

—Querida, esa es una de las falacias sobre las que deberé desengañarte. Óyelos, son unos brutos insensatos.

La tormenta se había desencadenado en la sala, y había alcanzado tales extremos que Verena se volvió hacia él con una súplica final.

—¡Yo lograría calmarlos con una sola palabra!

—Guarda para mí tus dulces palabras… tendrás necesidad de todas ellas en el futuro —dijo Ransom con una sonrisa.

Volvió a empujar la puerta que comunicaba con el vestíbulo, pero fue obligado a retroceder, junto con Verena, por un furioso asalto de la señora Tarrant. Al ver a su hija dispuesta a marcharse, se lanzó contra ella, en parte por indignación, en parte por el ciego impulso de retenerla, y con un estallido de lágrimas, reproches, plegarias, argumentos confusos y palabras de despedida, la estrechó en un abrazo que era también en parte una última caricia, en parte el castigo que hacía tres minutos había expresado el deseo de suministrarle y, al mismo tiempo, un freno para impedir la fuga de la muchacha.

—Madre, querida madre, todo será para bien, no puedo remediarlo, te quiero igual que antes… ¡déjame ir, déjame ir! —gemía Verena, besándola y a la vez tratando de librarse, con una mano tendida hacia Ransom.

Él vio que lo único que quería la muchacha en ese momento era escapar, abandonarlo todo. Olive estaba precisamente allí, en el umbral de la puerta, y tan pronto como Ransom la vio, percibió que la debilidad que había mostrado minutos antes había desaparecido completamente. Era de nuevo dueña de sí, una mujer firme en medio de su desolación. La expresión de aquel rostro era algo que Ransom no lograría olvidar jamás; era imposible imaginarse algo más semejante a una visión de la esperanza traicionada y el orgullo herido. Seca, desesperada, rígida, aunque aún vacilante; sus ojos pálidos y brillantes parecían a punto de salírsele de las órbitas, como si lo único que buscaran fuera la muerte. Ransom tuvo la percepción, a pesar de la confusión del momento, de que si ella hubiera encontrado allí entonces una punta de acero o una hoguera se hubiera arrojado sin pestañear, en su papel de heroína. Todo eso ocurría mientras en la sala crecía la agitación y se difundía en grandes oleadas, como si Selah Tarrant y el empresario le hablaran a la multitud tratando de calmarla, lográndolo por un momento, pero perdiendo el dominio sobre ella un instante después. Abatidos por una de esas súbitas explosiones, una dama y un caballero entraron por el corredor, y Ransom pudo reconocer en ellos a la señora Farrinder y a su marido.

—Bien, bien, señorita Chancellor —dijo con notable aspereza aquella mujer coronada por el éxito—, ¿es esta la manera en que piensa usted reivindicar a nuestro sexo?

Cruzó con paso rápido la sala, seguida por Amariah, que comentaba entretanto que parecía que hubiera alguna falla en la organización, y los dos se retiraron deprisa sin siquiera dirigirle una mirada a Verena, cuyo conflicto con la madre aún no terminaba. Ransom trató, con la debida consideración hacia la señora Tarrant, de separarlas, sin dirigir ni una sola palabra a Olive. Para él había terminado, y ni siquiera vio su lívida cara, que repentinamente enrojeció, como si las palabras de la señora Farrinder hubiesen sido un latigazo, ni cómo, al parecer con una súbita inspiración, se precipitó hacia la puerta del escenario. Si la hubiera observado, le habría parecido tal vez que trataba de encontrar la justa expiación que buscaba, ofreciéndose a los millares de espectadores a los que había desilusionado y engañado, ofreciendo su persona para que la hicieran pedazos. Tal vez le hubiera recordado a alguna agitadora de la revolución francesa, erguida tras una barricada, o aun a la figura trágica de Hypatia, despedazada por las turbas furiosas de Alejandría. Por un instante la detuvo la presencia de la señora Burrage y de su hijo, que habían abandonado el escenario siguiendo el ejemplo de los Farrinder y que irrumpieron en aquella sala como buscando refugio en medio de una tormenta. El rostro de la madre expresaba la sorpresa de una persona bien educada que, invitada a comer, ve que ante sus ojos quitan el mantel de la mesa; el joven que la llevaba del brazo quedó impresionado ante el espectáculo de Verena que lograba zafarse del abrazo de la señora Tarrant para ser nuevamente retenida, y por la inesperada presencia del joven de Mississippi. Sus bellos ojos azules se movieron de uno a otro, y pareció que el espectáculo lo contrariaba indeciblemente. Por un momento dio la impresión de haberse decidido a intervenir, y era evidente que le habría gustado poder decir después, sin jactancias, que él había impedido que aquel conflicto degenerara en una riña. Pero Verena, desesperada por escapar, permanecía indiferente a él, y Ransom no le parecía una persona indicada para hacerle alguna observación. La señora Burrage y Olive, al encontrarse en el camino, se lanzaron una mirada que expresaba por una parte una fugaz ironía, y por la otra un ciego y absoluto desafío.

—Oh, ¿va usted a hablar ahora? —preguntó la dama de Nueva York con una risa superficial.

Olive había ya desaparecido; pero Ransom pudo escuchar su respuesta:

—Voy a que me silben, me escupan y me insulten.

—¡Olive, Olive! —gritó repentinamente Verena, y su grito penetrante debió de llegar hasta el escenario.

Pero Ransom ya había empleado la fuerza de sus músculos, la había sacado del lugar, y la hacía correr a toda prisa, dejando que la señora Tarrant se dejara caer en los brazos de la señora Burrage, que (estaba seguro) dentro de unos minutos la confortaría en sus lágrimas y le proporcionaría el recuerdo, destinado a adquirir gran valor, de un apoyo aristocrático y de una serena compostura. En el laberinto exterior, grupos apresurados, un poco atemorizados, abandonaban la sala, renunciando a aquel juego. Ransom cubrió el rostro de Verena con la capucha de su capa, para ocultar su identidad. Y mientras se confundían con la multitud que salía, advirtió el repentino silencio, completo, terrible, que se había hecho en la sala al aparecer en el escenario Olive Chancellor. Todos los ruidos cesaron en ese instante: era un silencio respetuoso, el gran público esperaba, y fuera cual fuese la explicación que ella pudiera dar (Ransom pensaba que para su prima debía de ser un momento bastante embarazoso), era difícil pensar que recibieran sus palabras arrojándole los bancos. Aunque extasiado por su victoria, Ransom sintió en ese momento un poco de pesar por ella, y le alivió saber que, aunque exasperado, el público de Boston no dejaba nunca de ser generoso.

—¡Ah, ahora me siento feliz! —dijo Verena cuando llegaron a la calle.

Pero aunque la joven se declaraba feliz, él pudo descubrir que, bajo la capucha, estaba llorando. Y es de temer que en aquel matrimonio, tan lejos de ser admirable, al que la muchacha iba a entregarse no fueran aquellas las últimas lágrimas que estaba destinada a derramar.

Apéndices

Nota introductoria

La presente edición incluye dos textos complementarios de *Las bostonianas*: el primero, un capítulo del innovador estudio de Alexis de Tocqueville, *La democracia en América* (1835 y 1840); el segundo, unos pasajes de la reflexión de Henry James sobre Estados Unidos, *La escena americana* (1907).

En lo que respecta al mundo occidental podríamos afirmar que, al menos hasta cierto punto, el liberalismo, el progresismo y el feminismo modernos han triunfado. En *Las bostonianas* estas ideas están representadas por el personaje de Olive y se imponen a las opiniones de Ransom, cuyos ideales habían quedado manifiestamente anticuados ya en la época. Así pues, para clarificar su contexto y que el lector pueda comprender lo que él representa ideológicamente hablando y dónde tiene su origen este personaje, conviene leer el breve capítulo del estudio de De Tocqueville que aquí reproducimos.

En el segundo apéndice, *La escena americana* —que se publicó más o menos treinta años después de *Las bostonianas*—, nos encontramos ante lo que podría considerarse una cristalización de las actitudes de James respecto a su país natal. Un tema que James trató de forma sistemática tanto en su obra de ficción como de no ficción es que la América moderna estaba vacía desde el punto de vista cultural. En la época en que se publicó este texto James descubrió que habían cambiado muchas cosas en la superficie. *La escena americana* no es una lectura rápida ni fácil, pero si uno sigue detenidamente los extractos seleccionados, obtiene una panorámica de la América de *Las bostonianas*: una novela que Henry James esperaba que fuera «muy característica de nuestro estado social».

Apéndice 1

Alexis de Tocqueville,
«Qué clase de despotismo democrático deben temer los países»*

Durante mi estancia en Estados Unidos había observado que un estado social democrático, parecido al de los americanos, podía ofrecer singulares facilidades para el establecimiento del despotismo; y al regresar a Europa advertí que la mayoría de nuestros gobernantes se habían servido ya de las ideas, los sentimientos y las necesidades engendradas por ese mismo estado social con el fin de extender el círculo de su poder. Eso me hizo pensar que los países de la cristiandad podrían sufrir el mismo tipo de opresión que pesaba sobre otros países del mundo antiguo.

Un examen más certero del tema, y cinco años de reflexiones, no han disminuido mis temores, pero han cambiado su objeto.

En siglos anteriores no ha habido un soberano tan absoluto ni tan poderoso que haya querido administrar por sí solo, y sin ayuda de intermediarios, todas las partes de un gran imperio; ninguno ha intentado someter a todos sus súbditos de manera indiscriminada a una estricta norma uniforme, ni enseñar y dirigir en persona a todos los miembros de la comunidad. La idea de una empresa semejante no ha surgido jamás de la mente humana; y si algún hombre la hubiera concebido, la falta de información, la imperfección del sistema administrativo y, por encima de todo, los obstáculos naturales motivados por la desigualdad de condiciones habrían frenado rápidamente la ejecución de un proyecto tan vasto.

Cuando los emperadores romanos estaban en la cumbre de su poder, los distintos pueblos del imperio conservaban una gran variedad de hábitos y costumbres; aunque

estaban sometidos al mismo monarca, la mayoría de las provincias se administraban por separado; abundaban en municipios poderosos y activos; y si bien el gobierno del imperio estaba centralizado en manos del emperador, y él siempre era el árbitro supremo de todos los asuntos, los detalles de la vida social y las actividades privadas quedaban en su mayor parte fuera de su control. Los emperadores poseían, es cierto, un poder inmenso y desenfrenado que les permitía satisfacer todos sus caprichos y emplear a tal fin toda la fuerza del Estado. A menudo abusaban de ese poder de forma arbitraria para privar a sus súbditos de sus propiedades o de su vida: su tiranía era muy onerosa para una minoría, pero no afectaba a un gran número; se centraba en unos objetos principales y omitía el resto; era violenta, pero su alcance era limitado.

Parece que si el despotismo se estableciera entre los países democráticos de nuestros días, adoptaría un carácter distinto; se extendería más y sería más moderado; degradaría a los hombres sin atormentarlos. No tengo la menor duda de que en una época de instrucción e igualdad como la nuestra los soberanos podrían acumular más fácilmente todo el poder político en sus manos, e interferirían con mayor frecuencia y resolución en el círculo de los intereses privados de lo que cualquier soberano antiguo pudo hacerlo jamás. Pero el mismo principio de igualdad que posibilita el despotismo atempera su rigor. Ya hemos visto cómo las costumbres de la sociedad pasan a ser más humanas y gentiles a medida que los hombres se vuelven más iguales y semejantes. Cuando ningún miembro de la comunidad tiene mucho poder ni mucha riqueza, el tirano se queda, por así decirlo, sin oportunidades y sin campo de acción. Como las fortunas escasean, las pasiones de los hombres se restringen, su imaginación se limita, y su placer se simplifica. Esta moderación universal modera también al soberano y mantiene dentro de unos límites sus desmesurados deseos.

Independientemente de estos motivos derivados de la naturaleza del estado social, podría añadir muchos otros que escapan a mi objeto de estudio, pero debo ceñirme a los límites que me he fijado.

Los gobiernos democráticos pueden volverse violentos e incluso crueles en períodos de extrema efervescencia o de grave peligro, pero esas crisis son raras y breves. Cuando considero las pasiones mezquinas de nuestros contemporáneos, la molicie de sus costumbres, su nivel de instrucción, la pureza de su religión, la mansedumbre de su

moralidad, sus hábitos regulares y diligentes, y la moderación que casi todos observan en sus vicios y virtudes, no temo que hallen tiranos en sus gobernantes, sino más bien en sus guardianes.

Creo, pues, que el tipo de opresión que amenaza a los países democráticos no se parece a nada que haya existido antes: nuestros contemporáneos no encontrarán ningún precedente en sus recuerdos. Yo mismo trato en vano de dar con una expresión que transmita con exactitud la idea que me he formado de ella: las antiguas palabras «despotismo» y «tiranía» son inadecuadas; se trata de un concepto nuevo, y ya que no puedo darle nombre, intentaré definirlo.

Procuraré identificar los novedosos rasgos bajo los que el despotismo puede aparecer en el mundo. Lo primero que llama la atención es la innumerable multitud de hombres iguales y semejantes que se esfuerzan sin descanso por obtener los vulgares y mezquinos placeres con los que sacian sus vidas. Como viven aislados, cada uno es ajeno al destino del resto: sus hijos y sus amigos constituyen para él el conjunto de la humanidad. En cuanto al resto de sus conciudadanos, está cerca de ellos, pero no los ve; los toca, pero no los siente; existe en sí mismo y para sí mismo; y aunque le queda su familia, se puede decir que ha perdido su patria.

Por encima de esta raza de hombres se alza un poder inmenso y tutelar que se encarga solo de garantizar sus gratificaciones y de vigilar su destino. Dicho poder es absoluto, minucioso, regular, providente y moderado. Sería como la autoridad de un padre si como ella tuviese por objetivo preparar a los hombres para la madurez, pero trata, por el contrario, de mantenerlos en una infancia perpetua: se da por satisfecha con que la gente disfrute, siempre y cuando no piensen en nada salvo en disfrutar. Un gobierno semejante trabaja con gusto por su felicidad, pero quiere ser el agente exclusivo y el único árbitro de esa felicidad: garantiza su seguridad, prevé y satisface sus necesidades, facilita sus placeres, gestiona sus principales negocios, dirige su industria, regula el descenso de la propiedad y subdivide sus herencias; ¿qué queda salvo ahorrarles la preocupación de pensar y las molestias de vivir?

De ese modo hace cada día menos útil y frecuente el libre albedrío del hombre; circunscribe su voluntad a un círculo cada vez más estrecho, y poco a poco roba al individuo todos los usos de sí mismo. El principio de igualdad ha preparado a los

hombres para estas cosas: los ha predispuesto a soportarlas, y a menudo a considerarlas ventajas.

Después de haber tomado a cada miembro en su poderosa mano y haberlo moldeado a voluntad, el poder supremo extiende a continuación su brazo sobre toda la sociedad. Abarca la superficie de esta con una red de pequeñas y complicadas normas, minuciosas y uniformes, que las mentes más originales y los caracteres más vigorosos no pueden penetrar para elevarse sobre la masa. No se quiebra la voluntad del hombre, pero se ablanda, se tuerce y se guía; la voluntad rara vez obliga al hombre a actuar, pero continuamente lo disuade de hacerlo; un poder semejante no destruye, pero impide la existencia; no tiraniza, pero oprime, debilita, extingue y atonta a un pueblo hasta que cada país queda reducido a un simple rebaño de animales tímidos y laboriosos, cuyo pastor es el gobierno.

Siempre he pensado que la servidumbre metódica, callada y apacible que acabo de describir se podría combinar más fácilmente de lo que se cree con algunas formas externas de libertad, y que podría incluso establecerse al amparo de la soberanía del pueblo.

Nuestros contemporáneos están sometidos de forma continua a dos pasiones opuestas: quieren que los dirijan y desean seguir siendo libres, y como no pueden destruir ni una ni otra, se esfuerzan por satisfacer las dos a la vez. Conciben una forma de gobierno única, tutelar y todopoderosa, pero elegida por el pueblo. Aúnan el principio de centralización y el de soberanía popular; eso les da un descanso: si bien están tutelados, se consuelan pensando que han elegido a sus guardianes. Cada hombre se deja sujetar porque ve que el que sostiene el extremo de la cadena no es una persona ni una clase de personas, sino el pueblo en general.

Con este sistema, el pueblo se libra de su estado de dependencia el tiempo justo para elegir a su dueño y luego se vuelve a sumir en él. Hoy día muchas personas se contentan con este tipo de compromiso entre el despotismo administrativo y la soberanía del pueblo, y creen que han hecho suficiente por la protección de la libertad individual cuando la han entregado al poder del país en general. Pero a mí no me basta: el carácter de a quien debo obediencia es menos importante para mí que la obediencia impuesta.

No negaré, empero, que una constitución como esta me parece infinitamente preferible a una en la que, después de haber concentrado todos los poderes, haya que depositarlos en manos de una persona o un cuerpo de personas irresponsable. De todas las formas que puede adoptar el despotismo democrático, esta sería sin duda la peor.

Cuando el soberano es electivo, o está vigilado de cerca por un cuerpo legislativo en realidad electivo e independiente, la opresión que ejerce sobre los individuos es a veces mayor, pero siempre menos degradante, porque cuando un hombre es oprimido y desarmado todavía puede imaginar que es a sí mismo a quien obedece, y que a uno de sus deseos supedita todos los demás. Del mismo modo, puedo entender que cuando el soberano representa al país y depende del pueblo poseedor de unos derechos y un poder de los que se priva al ciudadano, no solo sirve al jefe del Estado, sino al Estado mismo, y los particulares obtienen cierto beneficio del sacrificio de su independencia en aras del público. Crear una representación del pueblo en cada país centralizado es, por lo tanto, una forma de reducir el mal que puede provocar la centralización extrema, pero no de librarse de él.

Reconozco que de esta manera se da cabida a la intervención de los individuos en los asuntos más importantes, pero se suprime en los más pequeños y privados. No hay que olvidar que es especialmente peligroso esclavizar a los hombres a los detalles menores de la vida. Por mi parte, me inclinaría a considerar la libertad menos necesaria en las cosas grandes que en las pequeñas, si fuera posible asegurar una sin poseer la otra.

El sometimiento a los asuntos menores se produce a diario, y toda la sociedad lo padece sin distinción. No empuja a los hombres a la rebeldía, pero los enoja sin cesar hasta hacerles renunciar al ejercicio de su voluntad. De este modo, su espíritu se quiebra poco a poco y su carácter se debilita, mientras que la obediencia, exigida en ocasiones importantes pero escasas, solo manifiesta la servidumbre cada cierto tiempo y descarga su peso sobre un número reducido de hombres. Resulta inútil convocar a un pueblo que se ha vuelto tan dependiente del poder central para que elija de vez en cuando a los representantes de ese poder; ese raro y breve ejercicio de su libre albedrío, por importante que sea, no les impedirá perder poco a poco las facultades de

pensar, sentir y actuar por sí mismos y, de esta manera, descender poco a poco por debajo del nivel de humanidad.

Y añado que pronto serán incapaces de ejercer el único gran privilegio que les queda. Los países democráticos que han introducido la libertad en su órgano político, al mismo tiempo que aumentaban el despotismo de su órgano administrativo, han incurrido en extrañas paradojas. Si se trata de manejar asuntos menores en los que lo único que se requiere es sentido común, consideran que el pueblo no está a la altura; pero cuando el gobierno del país está en peligro, el pueblo es investido de inmensos poderes y se convierte a veces en juguete de su gobernador y otras en su dueño: más que reyes y menos que hombres. Después de haber agotado las distintas formas de elección sin encontrar una que se ajuste a su propósito, se asombran aún y se empeñan en seguir buscando, como si el mal que señalan, más que en la constitución del país, se originase en el cuerpo electoral.

Es difícil concebir cómo los hombres que han renunciado por completo al hábito de gobernarse a sí mismos pueden elegir bien a aquellos que les van a gobernar, y nadie creerá jamás que del sufragio de un pueblo servil puede surgir un gobierno liberal, sabio y vigoroso.

Una constitución, que debería ser republicana en su cabeza y ultramonárquica en el resto de sus partes, siempre me ha parecido un monstruo efímero. Los vicios de los gobernantes y la ineptitud del pueblo provocarían rápidamente su ruina, y el país, cansado de sus representantes y de sí mismo, crearía instituciones más libres o no tardaría en volver a estirarse a los pies de un solo amo.

Apéndice 2

Henry James,
*La escena americana**

Del capítulo 4, «Nueva York: notas sociales»

Si no temiera parecer demasiado pesimista, haría hincapié en la interesante, atractiva y patética visión de despilfarro —no sé de qué otra forma llamarla— que arrojó su extraño manto de melancolía sobre mis paseos por las partes de la ciudad al parecer más nobles y hermosas. Esa visión era resultado, creo, de un par de factores más profundos que el evidente: la constante impresión de pasmo que producían casas e hileras, recientes construcciones caras (que habían exigido reflexión además de dinero, que habían nacido presuntamente como demostración seria y que estaban, por consiguiente, empezando a vivir en la historia) condenadas a su eliminación, a su extinción, en su mejor momento, y aguardándola con sus atractivos rostros tan lozanos y sin embargo tan pálidos y angustiados. El elemento más trágico de la Revolución francesa, y por lo tanto el más trágico en los anales de la historia de la humanidad, fue el frecuente caso de los jóvenes enviados al cadalso: los mozos y doncellas, perplejos e inmaculados, nacidos recientemente en un mundo engalanado para ellos con flores, y a quienes sobrevino, no menos súbitamente, el horror de los horrores. Ellos fueron en realidad las víctimas en las que pensé, por absurdo que parezca, bajo el pasmo en cuestión; a pesar de ello, no me refiero a eso al hablar de mi impresión de esfuerzo desperdiciado. He tenido ocasión de hablar —y uno solo puede hablar con compasión — de la parte humana, la parte comunicativa, de ese vivo espectáculo de una sociedad

que trata de convertirse, con cada mejora, en una versión coherente de sí misma, y que extiende literalmente antenas interrogativas en el ambiente, buscando (a ojos del espectador cautivado) un indicativo y una prueba de su éxito. Ese efecto de ciertas de las manifestaciones de riqueza de Nueva York es, que yo sepa, único; en ningún otro sitio el poder pecuniario agita sus alas en el vacío y busca a su alrededor la caridad de un indicio de la posible torpeza o la posible elegancia de su movimiento, una señal de si está volando demasiado alto o demasiado bajo para el buen gusto. En el resto de las ciudades americanas, por un lado, los vuelos son menos numerosos, aunque prometen no poca diversión; y en las viejas congregaciones de hombres de las ciudades de Europa proporcionadamente ricas, por otra parte, el buen gusto está presente, a efectos de referencia y comparación, encarnado y consagrado en cien formas distintas. Ese es el motivo por el que, repito, reconozco en la difícil situación de Nueva York un carácter y un *pathos* particular. La suntuosa demostración de las afueras fue una evidencia, en el último análisis, de soledad individual, de donde vino su insistente testimonio de despilfarro: un despilfarro todavía mayor que el simple juego de reconstruir.

Esa llamada de atención radicalmente distinta del espectáculo general europeo, el efecto, en el panorama de las cosas, de una economía importante y consumada, ejercida de forma tradicional, brota del hecho de que las viejas sociedades, las viejas e incluso las nuevas aristocracias, se organizan exactamente para proporcionar funciones, formas, el elemento de la costumbre y la perpetuidad, a cualquier enormidad particular, por grande que sea. Un enorme bienestar particular que no está acompañado de fuerza de aseveración continua es una anomalía difícil de hallar, por lo tanto, en países donde los acuerdos sociales parecen comprometerse, por su propio carácter y pretensión, a hacer el futuro tan interesante como el pasado. Esas condiciones, las románticas para el buscador de estampas, se ven en general amenazadas; suelen cambiar en todos lados, en parte por la propia fuerza del ejemplo americano, aunque hay que decir que en Francia, por ejemplo, no han hecho otra cosa que cambiar durante cien años. Aun así, sigue siendo cierto que por una vez que nos preguntemos en «Europa» qué va a ser de determinada propiedad, ya sea un «puesto» familiar o un palacio, un castillo, un cuadro, una *parure* u otro atributo de riqueza, en Estados Unidos nos recreamos en la pregunta

veinte veces, tan poco nos parece estar comprometiéndose el orden visible para preverlo. Ahí entra en escena la nota de soledad por parte de esos valores laxos: profunda como la mirada en los ojos de los perros que suplican contra un cambio de amo. El orden visible entre nosotros se compromete como mucho a que cambien de manos, y la pobreza y la indignidad de ese desastre les sienta como una traición. La parte más alta de la Quinta Avenida, por ejemplo, está bordeada de viviendas cuya extensión y cuyo acabado parecen destinados a insinuar que están vinculadas tan majestuosamente como el papeleo puede vincularlas. Pero ya sabemos lo poco que les gusta tal gentileza o garantía; y de no ser por nuestro tierno corazón y nuestra encantadora imaginación, los destrozaríamos en plena flor con nuestro implacable análisis.

«Está muy bien que, como no habéis tenido pasado, os espere un magnífico futuro como compensación. ¿Qué vais a hacer con vuestro futuro, a pesar de vuestros aires?», queremos saber. «¿Qué elementos de futuro, para como está el gran mundo, tenéis asegurados? Haced lo que queráis, sentaos aquí a la luz "refulgente" del negocio, sin que os recordemos qué garantías, qué continuidad y herencia majestuosas representa eso. ¿Dónde están no solo vuestro hijo mayor y su hijo mayor, indispensables para cualquier proyección real de vuestro patrimonio, incapaces de deshacerse de vosotros aunque lo deseen; sino también dónde está la vieja media familiar, bien llena y tan pesada como para no moverse, un día horrible, con el aire frío de Wall Street? No, a lo que os veis abocados para ser "importantes" es al presente, pura y simplemente, que se yergue lo más firme posible entre un futuro ausente y un pasado ausente. Trabajáis demasiado por lo que sois; trabajáis todavía más por lo que podéis ser, y no fingís, por encima de todo, con la lección bien a mano del extraño caso de Newport, no fingís», decimos, «no saber a lo que nos referimos.»

«Decimos», escribo, pero el caso es que no decimos nada, y es en realidad ese asuntillo de Newport lo que nos mantiene compasivamente callados. El actual estado de Newport merece un capítulo aparte, del que estoy deseando ocuparme, pero deberá esperar su turno; si lo menciono aquí es solo por el gran apoyo que presta a esta interpretación del estado de la opulencia de Nueva York. El caso expuesto hoy —¡oh, tan viva y patéticamente!— es que Nueva York y demás opulencias, al crear el lugar,

durante una serie de años, como parte del esfuerzo de la «sociedad americana» por averiguar a modo de experimento dónde acabaría, ahora ya no necesita saberlo; solo ha aprendido, a un coste inmenso, cómo librarse de una ilusión. «Hemos descubierto, después de todo (ya que es cuestión de averiguar "dónde" acabaríamos), que no acabaríamos en Newport, si es posible que acabemos en otro sitio, y con nuestros medios, sin duda podemos; de modo que dejaremos con gran pesar que el pobre Newport lo demuestre.» Ese comentario está ahora escrito sobre la faz del escenario, y no se me ocurre un error confesado de forma tan rápida, y sin embargo de manera tan exquisita y cautivadoramente cínica: los límites de las casas bonitas y los delicados jardines cerrados, declarados en ruina y abandonados, pero a la vez tan «bien cuidados» para cubrir la retirada de sus promotores. El aire y la luz, suaves y discretos, parecen hablar con diplomacia para unas personas a las que les diera vergüenza estar allí, como si pudiera avergonzarles que les demostrasen que una vez habían sido tan ingenuos y tan burgueses. El caso es que han aprendido a no serlo siguiendo el terrible método de agotar la lista de errores. Newport, para ellos —o para nosotros—, es solo uno de esos errores; y no estamos seguros de que las pomposas casas de Nueva York, la mayoría de ellas provisionales, y provisionales solo, repletas de frescos y pináculos, pero visiblemente faltas de motivos, no formen en conjunto otro. El duro destino de las nuevas aristocracias es que el elemento del error tenga que ser contemporáneo, no relegado a la penumbra del pasado, sino expuesto a todo el resplandor moderno, una luz fatal para la vana teoría según la cual la mejor sociedad ha crecido a pesar de sí misma. La vemos en Nueva York tratando, esforzándose al máximo, de crecer sin saber (a pesar de los muchos indicios) dónde crecer.

Vuelve a mí una y otra vez, por múltiples motivos, una impresión concreta de esta interesante lucha en el vacío: una imagen formada del organismo social superior revolcándose impotente, más o menos a flote gracias a su inmensa buena voluntad y el esplendor de su entorno inmediato, pero traicionado por su escasez de recursos reales. La ocasión a la que me refiero fue simplemente una cena, organizada con la mejor intención, pero en la que el matiz de ornamentación lujosa, de elevada situación en general, fue tan constante que se presentó en la página de la vida de Nueva York como una mancha morada sin contexto posible; como consciente, casi de forma penosa, de

que no había ningún pasaje similar. El escenario de nuestro banquete fue un palacio, y la perfección del marco y el servicio fueron absolutos; las damas, hermosas, elegantes y resplandecientes con tanta piedra preciosa, lucían diademas y vestidos de cola, una suerte de magnificencia oficial prescrita; pero era imposible no preguntarse con qué tenían que acompañarse o rimar, en el amplio marco americano, tan grandes asuntos. El tono material era tan elevado que no conllevaba ningún orden social, ninguna aplicación, pero como tributo al ideal, a lo exquisito, necesitaba apoyo, algún tipo de consagración. La dificultad, la ironía de la situación, era que muchas de las implicaciones de la plenitud, es decir, de un orden social sustentador, estaban ausentes. A las once no teníamos nada que hacer —o al menos las damas— salvo dispersarnos y acostarnos. No teníamos nada, como en Londres o en París, para «seguir»; y seguir, para la aspiración de Nueva York, siempre es un obstáculo. Una gran recepción palaciega habría estado a la altura de las circunstancias del caso: habría sido un buen remate. Cuando hablo de las circunstancias del caso debo recordarme que no eran todas iguales; otra señal, empero, de la inevitable irregularidad de la mancha morada en las grandes democracias comerciales. El color subido exigido se podría obtener de las damas, pero en menor medida, se veía fácilmente, de los hombres. La impresión era singular, pero estaba allí: si hubiera habido una recepción palaciega, las damas habrían tenido que ir solas, confiando en que les proporcionasen los compañeros adecuados en el lugar, por ejemplo, con los resguardos para recuperar sus capas. El tono elevado, todas las augustas referencias, se debían a la suntuosa casa, a las aspirantes a mujeres armoniosas, a las diademas y las colas de los vestidos; no se debían a los amigables caballeros, encantadores a su manera, en cuya a menudo pintoresca presencia, pero sin cuya ayuda inmediata, la sociedad americana sigue progresando para alcanzar la «mejor» conciencia.

Hay que señalar el fracaso de los sexos para correr parejos desde el punto de vista social en Estados Unidos, un elemento que tal vez sea más indicativo de un «drama» interesante, como ya he insinuado, que ningún otro aspecto del país. Sin embargo, ese fracaso ilustra el toqueteo de riqueza condenado de antemano en la conquista de comodidades: la extraña necesidad bajo la cual el interés social se afana por averiguar, como preliminar, qué civilización es realmente. Si los hombres no contribuyen a ello,

sino solo las mujeres, ¿qué caso nuevo es ese y bajo qué extraños agravantes no se presenta el problema? Deberíamos considerar cada tratamiento semejante de un orden distinto un tratamiento empírico, cuyas limitaciones y aberraciones surgen, para el analista inquieto, de la forma más ilustrativa. Su presencia se nota de forma inconfundible, por ejemplo, en la extravagante insistencia general de la ópera, que desempeña su papel como gran nave de salvación, el sustituto completo de las demás naves de salvación concebibles; la conciencia social trepa de ese modo hasta ella, sometida a tensión, mientras toda la sociedad se apelotona en otros receptáculos públicos, los desesperados vagones del metro o los enormes ascensores de los edificios altos. Uno no tarda en darse cuenta de que la ópera, como se goza en Nueva York, es merecedora por su música y pintoresquismo de su importante función; su efecto es espléndido, pero aun así produce una extraña impresión al oír que, como institución, cruje y chirría, casi se parte y agrieta, con el peso añadido depositado en ella: el peso que en mundos organizados de otra manera se reparte de un modo hábil y se distribuye por todo el suelo. A falta de una recepción en una corte, nuestras damas de las diademas y los trajes de cola podrían haber asistido a una sesión de ópera, pues esas ocasiones ofrecen la única aproximación conocida a lo que significa una diadema, por así decirlo, para la ley americana. Sin embargo, ni siquiera allí habría habido nadie a quien hubieran podido hacer una reverencia; por consiguiente, su única opción posible parece ser tributarse homenaje, tenazmente, unas a otras. Esta verdad señala otra vez el efecto de un panorama con escasa presencia masculina, pues ¿qué presencia masculina autóctona concibe que la portadora de una diadema americana haga una reverencia? Semejante visión es indicativa de hasta qué punto vemos el empirismo social poniendo, por fuerza, el carro delante del caballo. En mundos organizados de otra forma, aparte de haber muchos objetos de veneración, la ocasión misma, con su carácter plenamente desarrollado, produce la diadema. En Nueva York este símbolo tiene que generar, por una ardua extensión de su virtud, la ocasión.

Del capítulo 7, «Boston»

En el nivel más bajo no se encuentran cabos sueltos ni revoloteos errabundos, tanto en la vieja prosa como en la vieja poesía, aunque hay actuaciones de distinto orden a la sombra de las cuales tales asuntos acostumbran a parecer de forma simple, y tal vez bastante pobremente, subjetivos. El nivel más bajo es muy rico y próspero y monótono, pero ¡oh, qué inexpresivamente vacío! Mientras que la Nueva Tierra se corresponde a la perfección con su nombre, y se deleita de forma más visible y satisfecha con su novedad, sus cimientos desplomados y excavados, el hogar hasta hace poco de un agua marina estancada, las largas y rectas avenidas residenciales, las vistas documentales, como uno mismo se sorprende declarándolas, atestiguan con una perfección particular una extensa faceta de la vida americana. Los vientos y las nieves invernales, y el polvo eterno, hacen carreras en ellas por el camino mejor despejado para esa desapacible competición; los enladrillados de una legua de largo reflejan el extenso vacío durante muchos meses del año con sus lisas y duras capas de hielo (la combinación de hielo y ladrillo es desastrosa), y las innumerables ventanas, a lo largo y ancho, se miran unas otras, todas desesperadas, como buscando revelaciones, indiscreciones, roturas audibles, resonantes, rebeldes o explosivas del cristal desde dentro, que nunca perturban la paz. (Nadie empezará, y el hacha enterrada, a pesar de las miradas pensativas al lugar donde se encuentra, nunca se desentierra.) De modo que esas afirmaciones continuas sobre la situación de uno de los estados más tranquilos y estables despiertan perversamente, por parte del inquieto analista, preguntas que desde el punto de vista lógico parecerían las menos indicadas. Denominamos esos aspectos «documentales» porque nos parece que dicen mucho, más que ningún otro, sobre la posible serenidad, la educación más elemental, la sosegada cohesión de una inmensa burguesía comercial y profesional dejada en libertad. Aquí había un orden semejante, caracterizado por vivir al máximo. Una burguesía sin una aristocracia de la que preocuparse es muy distinta de una burguesía que lucha a su sombra, y nada podría expresar mejor la condición de una comunidad que vive su vida al sol social que esas interminables perspectivas de seguridad.

¿Por qué, pues, las tardes de diciembre, el analista inquieto, deteniéndose en las esquinas que dan al este, halla en sus labios el verso de la «larga calle inhóspita» de Tennyson? ¿Por qué, si Harley Street, si Wimpole, es inhóspita, debería serlo también

Marlborough Street, Boston, aparte de lo tópico de su inmotivado nombre? Aquí no se respira una monotonía de ladrillo negro arrendado, ni un rechazo manifiesto, en beneficio de las clases altas anquilosadas y estrictamente subordinadas, de la expresión, la animación, la variedad, la curiosidad; aquí, por el contrario, es habitual la fachada individual con toda su independencia y a veces toda su felicidad: toda esta región es, como muchas regiones parecidas de Estados Unidos hoy día, el hogar de la carta blanca, un campo para los experimentos arquitectónicos más audaces. Hay casas interesantes y admirables —aunque siempre un exceso de detestables ventanales—, y por encima de todo encontramos lo que abunda en América por todas partes a fin de alegrar, o como mínimo arreglar, el día: esa estampa especial del camino despejado y las grandes oportunidades por delante, que combinada con la voluntad de vivir, el dinero por gastar, los conocimientos por adquirir y aplicar, parece colocar las posibilidades materiales en relucientes filas ilimitadas. Beacon Street, además, acostumbraba a estirarse hacia atrás como un práctico telescopio para enfocar, con su extremo superior, en un aire cuyo beneficio es ser muy raras veces superficial, la cúpula dorada de la Casa del Estado: nueva como un juguete de Navidad, vista sobre el suelo de un gran jardín de infancia salubre. Todo ello formaba una estampa cívica que amueblaba un poco el desierto de la alegre vida familiar. Pero Marlborough Street, por imperturbables razones propias, solía partirme el corazón. Era inútil jurar que esperaría a haber sondeado el misterio; a haber aprendido por qué la negra y trasnochada Harley Street, por ejemplo, con una anodina hilera de casas tras otra, poseía carácter y profundidad, mientras que lo que había ante mí topaba con mi sensibilidad con la sutileza de un niño precoz; y todavía más por qué dicho efecto debía ser, como efectivamente era, tan irritante. Si hay formas extrañas de producir interés en la mente crítica, hay sin duda formas más extrañas de no producirlo, y era importante para mí conseguir que «mi» extinto y compacto y expresivo pequeño Boston pareciera poseer todas las señales de carácter que a la Nueva Tierra, y lo que hay construido sobre ella, le faltaban. ¿Cómo se podía considerar el lugar sino con una perspectiva determinada? De modo que había que decidir definitivamente la perspectiva.

Eso era fácil de conseguir desde el momento en que uno había decidido conceder a la Nueva Tierra el hecho de posesión de todo lo apropiado y bello bajo el cielo. La paz

siempre podía derivarse de ese reconocimiento de todos los accesorios y herramientas, un centenar de cosas costosas, parques y palacios e instituciones, de los que la sociedad anterior había carecido; y había una conexión individual —solo una, cabe señalar— en la que por una hora podía parecer que la ciudad no tenía capacidad para la idea enaltecedora, ni aptitud para la curiosidad más refinada, que envidiaba el pasado. Pero mientras tanto resultaba extraño que un concepto tan elegante, tan elegantemente plasmado, como la Biblioteca Pública, que desbancó los demás, se comprometiera a dialogar con la percepción interna de uno del poder del dinero y el talento para los negocios más que de la vieja sensibilidad intelectual, o incluso la vieja sensibilidad moral. ¿Por qué, si no, debería uno haber pensado que un momento admirable de Emerson, una de las oscuras y primitivas salas de conferencias que han dejado de existir, o la tremenda e insuperable elocuencia de Wendell Phillips, durante el mismo período y sobre todo durante la guerra, estaban más imbuidos de la conciencia de literatura e historia que todo el promiscuo bullicio del palacio florentino junto a Copley Square? Tampoco es que ese edificio, fruto de enormes consideraciones, no tuviera un interés honorable; interés que habría tenido aunque solo fuera a la luz de la verdad constante, según la cual, en América casi cualquier aplicación o práctica a partir de una idea general aporta un aspecto nuevo y original. Las bibliotecas públicas son una idea realmente general, y uno ya ha visto y sigue viendo más que suficientes por todo el mundo; y sin embargo, enfrentarse a un ejemplo americano implica ver enseguida más diferencias que parecidos, y recabar en el acto nuevas pruebas de esa forma democrática de actuar que ha mostrado el gobierno americano para convertir una frase académica en un hecho enérgico. Los matices diferenciales del palacio florentino —de una elegancia más delicada, en verdad, aunque de una tosquedad menos sublime, que la mayoría de los palacios florentinos— se resuelven, como muchos matices parecidos, en nuestra impresión de que aquí todo el mundo está «en» todo, mientras que en Europa, por comparación, pocas personas están en algo (incluso en la «sociedad», convertida cada vez más en el refugio o la retirada habitual de las masas).

La institución de Boston es, pues, grande y completa, y su reserva se antoja prácticamente carente de *penetralia* al ausente que ha vuelto. Una biblioteca sin *penetralia* puede parecerle un templo sin altares; en cualquier caso, ejemplifica la

distinción entre un beneficio dado y un beneficio tomado, un préstamo, una cesión y una propiedad, un privilegio. El Museo Británico, el Louvre, la Biblioteca Nacional de Francia, los tesoros de South Kensington están sin duda a la disposición del pueblo, pero hay que señalar, creo, que la gente acude allí más o menos a la sombra del derecho esperado y concedido. Sigue siendo tan difícil como siempre interesante, sin embargo, identificar los detalles (una gran parte de los cuales son bastante evidentes, pero mucho más indefinibles) del puerto personal de una democracia que, a diferencia de la inglesa, es social además de política. Una de esas señales es que las democracias sociales se muestran poco amigas de la conservación de *penetralia*; de modo que cuando las *penetralia* son primordiales, como en un lugar de estudio y meditación, inevitablemente se van al traste. La principal escalera de Boston posee, con su amplitud de ala y su esplendor de mármol tostado, una elevada y exuberante belleza; además, soborna a los ausentes para que se emocionen al ampliarse de manera monumental hasta convertirse en un admirable recordatorio al servicio prestado por los dos grandes regimientos de élite voluntarios de Massachusetts en la guerra de Secesión. Esas visiones, esas felicidades, esos leones acostados y nombres grabados y recuerdos despertados, hallados en el crepúsculo de principios de otoño, colorean una impresión; aunque decir eso suponga, para las personas de la generación del autor de estas páginas, infringir el silencio en el que mejor puede refugiarse el aprecio de esas cosas: el refugio al que yo también me sentí inmediatamente transportado, por ejemplo, frente a la Casa del Estado, en presencia del noble y exquisito monumento a Robert Gould Shaw y el regimiento 54 de Massachusetts, obra de Saint-Gaudens. Hay obras de arte conmemorativo capaces de situarse de repente, gracias a su función en un determinado caso, al margen de la crítica elocuente; eso fue lo que pasó con respecto al principal elemento del edificio, la lujosa escalera de la biblioteca. Otra forma en que el soborno, como lo he llamado, de esa obra maestra ha funcionado es provocando al visitante una inmediata fascinación ante el carácter del patio profundo y la arcada interior del palacio, donde una abundancia de ciencia y buen gusto produce la sensación, cuando la luz vespertina se inclina tristemente, de estar en uno de los innumerables patios de color dorado del Vaticano.

Esos son los refinamientos del Boston actual, que acompañan como pueden a la saludable animación del resto del edificio, el bullicio multitudinario, las idas y venidas —como en una estación de ferrocarril— de personas con maletines y otros equipajes; la sencillez de su plano, las puertas abiertas y los accesos inmediatos, admirables para una estación de ferrocarril; los niños ubicuos, los más irreprimibles demócratas de la democracia, la búsqueda vana, por encima de todo, de las más insondables profundidades mencionadas; una parte que debería estar suficientemente dentro de otra, suficientemente apartada y consagrada, para no constituir una vía pública. Quizá no exploré el lugar como es debido, pero la magnitud y la distribución visibles del edificio siempre estaban presentes. Fue una sorpresa descubrir los audaces diseños decorativos de Puvis de Chavannes, de Sargent y Abbey, y John Elliott, colgados sobre simples cámaras de familiaridad y resonancia; y luego, debo añadir de inmediato, fue una sorpresa todavía mayor descubrir que uno no tenía razón para defenderlos contra tales libertades. Lo que era bueno para una cosa era bueno para la otra; si uno no los hubiera elogiado en los lugares públicos, y bajo las grandes logias de Italia como el encanto y la dignidad de esos lugares, en su calidad de pintura y bordado, ¿servirían aún para la elegante vida cotidiana? Es cierto que uno no se había sentido encarcelado en esa uniformidad en la Biblioteca Laurenciana ni en la Biblioteca Ambrosiana; y en cualquier caso, uno estaba aquí al filo del abismo. ¿No fue espléndido ver en Boston, por ejemplo, que se llevaban a cabo tales medidas para proporcionar diversión a los niños en las tardes lluviosas? Había tantas cabecitas inclinadas sobre sus cuentos que el edificio adquiría en ocasiones el aspecto, de acuerdo con la mayoría de los edificios americanos del mismo tipo, de una animada distribuidora de nueva literatura de ficción para jóvenes. Resultaba desconcertante, y sin embargo, ¿privaría uno cruelmente a los jóvenes, arrebatándoles el pan con melaza de la boca, de los derechos en los que se les ha instalado con una majestuosidad sin parangón fuera de Estados Unidos? Quizá no me equivoque, en todo caso, al calificar esa cuestión de abismal, y recuerdo que más de una vez me refugié en ella huyendo como un cobarde a través de la plaza hasta el Museo de Arte, que ya resultaba interesante y crecía con rapidez.

Allí, por algún motivo, las cuestiones se desvanecían de una manera exquisita; tal vez solo porque las cosas cribadas y seleccionadas poseen, de forma visible, el efecto

de desafiar la confianza hasta de los temerarios. Es característico de los objetos condenados a mostrar distinción que prácticamente creen un desierto a su alrededor, y la paz reinaba inalterada, observé, en las dos o tres salas del museo que albergan una pequeña aunque interesante y cada vez mayor colección de antigüedades. Allí el analista inquieto encontró trabajo a su alcance, solo que demasiado; y en presencia de la gema de la serie, de la elegancia tal vez demasiado consciente de cierta cabecita deteriorada y medio ciega de Afrodita, sintió que debía sustituir su función, aunque solo fuera por educación, por la de sonetista. Es una buena idea, y creo que merecedora del viaje a través del Atlántico, captar bajo la luz americana el hecho mismo del genio de Grecia. Hay cosas que no sabemos, emociones que no se pueden prever hasta que hemos vivido esa experiencia, que recomiendo al *raffiné* de prácticamente cualquier clima. Debo decirle que no ha visto una buena pieza griega hasta que la ha visto en América. Nos encontramos a primera vista ante el más cruel caso de trasplante, cuya moral, a pesar de su aplicación, no se vuelve ni mucho menos flagrante. La pequeña Afrodita, con sus conexiones, sus antecedentes y referencias que exhiben el máximo de destrozos, es sin duda una joya más solitaria que nunca sacada de su entorno; y sin embargo, ¿qué reconoce uno rápidamente sino que su lustre intrínseco se ha doblado en la medida de lo posible? La divina criatura ha perdido su trasfondo; ha perdido su compañía, y ahora tiene, en cierto modo, la más extraña de las compañías; pero lejos de haber perdido un ápice de su poder, ha ganado lo indecible, ya que lo que en esencia representa aquí lo representa sola, poniéndose de un modo indescriptible a la altura de las circunstancias. En resumen, con su sola presencia se ha anexionado a un imperio, y hay extraños momentos fugaces en los que, como ya he dicho de su conciencia, la misma certeza de ese hecho parece escondida en lo profundo de su belleza. ¿Dónde ha sido más diosa? ¿Dónde ha sido tan diosa? ¿Quién sabe? Siendo tan divina, quizá prevé el momento en que, como se ha «movido», el lugar de su actual paradero se convertirá en uno de sus santuarios. Los objetos condenados a la distinción crean un desierto a su alrededor, como ya he dicho, pero eso solo es para la burda confianza en otros asuntos. Para la confianza en ellos mismos crean un jardín, y por eso sentí que en esa parte del Museo de Arte de Boston brotaban delicadas flores bajo los indescriptibles ojos empañados. Esa impresión engulló cualquier otra; el lugar, fuera cual fuese, estaba

sumamente justificado, y me quedé frío al enterarme de que un lugar más grande y más imponente y más lujoso va a superarlo pronto.

El actual sistema se «remonta» casi al Boston de mediados de siglo, y está lleno de toda clase de comodidades acumuladas y concentradas. Ese hecho precisamente señala, de acuerdo con la terrible ley americana, que llega a su fin y ofrece una oportunidad a lo que no se ha probado antes. Se trata de la puesta en práctica consecuente del sistema rotativo: lo que no se ha probado aguarda siempre su turno, y piafa y resopla mientras espera, ajeno a la hora segura de la impaciencia en que también tendrá que retirarse. No es que las leyes americanas, tan operativas, no tengan casi siempre un extraño interés propio, basadas como están en uno de los más fuertes impulsos autóctonos. Vemos que esta característica se da una y otra vez, en especial donde vemos (una situación que se da muy a menudo) una universidad o una facultad «fundada» o ampliada. Este proceso casi siempre adopta la forma de una mayor cantidad de terrenos y casas y salones y habitaciones, más piscinas y campos de fútbol y gimnasios, un mayor lujo en ladrillo y mortero, una mayor ingenuidad, la más diestra concebible, en comodidades e instalaciones. Tal es la magia, tales las presencias, que acostumbran a figurar, más que ninguna otra, como la Institución, pervirtiendo de ese modo, como no hace falta comentar en exceso, la mejor idea colegiada: la teoría, indudable y más característica, de que con todo el hierro forjado y el roble y el cristal pintado, la enorme provisión, los mármoles y baldosas y claustros y hectáreas multiplicados, «la gente vendrá», es decir, que individuos valiosos vendrán y de alguna forma obrarán un milagro. En los albores de América, los individuos valiosos sin duda tenían que esperar mucho las cosas, pero eso se ha resuelto haciendo que las cosas esperen a los individuos valiosos. A lo que debo añadir —y es el motivo de la referencia que he hecho hace un momento— que ninguna impresión del «nuevo» Boston puede considerarse coherente sin recordar lo que le debe a esa rara exhibición del espíritu conseguido de forma reciente, por el bien de las bellas artes, y lo más noble que hay en ellas, mediante el genio solitario y heroico de un particular. Intentar explicar la historia de la Colección Gardner, maravillosamente reunida y espléndidamente albergada, sería desplazar un poco la línea que separa la propiedad privada de la pública; y sin embargo, la imposibilidad de encontrar una palabra que se ajuste a ella equivale a no

entender la complejidad de las condiciones en las que una devoción tan imperturbable a una gran idea (imperturbable a pesar de la batalla a librar, con una lamentable derrota, contra la protección estatal del arte nativo y contra otras cosas menos inesperadas) ha podido florecer. En presencia de los magníficos resultados obtenidos y la energía triunfante que lo domina todo, uno siente la vieja y noble tradición desinteresada de Boston menos truncada.

Del capítulo 12, «Richmond»

De acuerdo con una conclusión como la anterior [«Si uno no ha aprendido como mínimo a distinguir claramente, con la pluma en ristre, lo esencial de lo accesorio, solo tiene que taparse la cabeza para sobrellevar la vergüenza y esperar la merecida extinción»], en Richmond, en medio de anormales rigores invernales, tenía que sentirme engañado hasta el último poro por mi impresión del Sur; y al mismo tiempo, ante un cuadro a lo sumo anodino, comprendí, sin la redención de la nieve y el hielo inoportunos, que tenía que reconocer lo mucho que había arriesgado con mi teoría de la poesía latente del Sur. Durante un par de días bastante oscuros e inútiles, esa teoría constituyó mi único solaz y respaldo, y estuve sobre todo centrado en la importancia de volver a salir adelante. Recuerdo que tras una hora o dos me pregunté qué había esperado del interesante Richmond y, acto seguido, si había dado o no con una respuesta adecuada a ese primer desafío, tratando de adivinar la base original de expectación. Gracias al esfuerzo, mi oscura visita se iluminó, y me apresuro a añadir que la segunda parte de la pregunta me resultó bastante fácil de responder. ¿Cómo no iba a ser la visión de Richmond una idea potente? ¿Cómo no iba a ser interesante el lugar para un analista inquieto que había comprendido la carga de ese título ya en el estallido de la guerra de Secesión, si no antes, y en cuya juvenil imaginación la capital confederada se había tornado morbosa, fuliginosa, vivamente trágica, sobre todo bajo el proceso por el cual iba a acabar acorralada y aplastada por su destino, e investida de uno de esos grandes y reverberantes nombres históricos? Las ciudades del holocausto supremo, las masacres definitivas, la sangre, las llamas y las lágrimas comparten

páginas terribles; están señaladas con la siniestra marca roja a la vista de la cual el nervio sensible de la asociación reacciona siempre. Si la simple sombra tenía ese poder penetrante, ¿qué conmovedora virtud no residirá en las sustancias, el propio lugar, el escenario embrujado, como uno podría imaginarlo, de la antigua y vasta intensidad del drama? Una cosa al menos era segura: que por mucho que la impresión de los elementos reales fuera de dispersión, yo no podría haberme aproximado con una inteligencia más respetuosa y liberalmente preparada para la hospitalidad. Así pues, en conformidad con todo eso, ¿cómo no iba a parecerme ante las apariencias presentadas que las percepciones necesarias estaban en realidad en juego?

Recuerdo la sorpresa de esa pregunta después de un paseo interrogativo, un kilómetro aproximado del cual me había dejado con interrogantes y un tanto confundido. Había tenido que hacérmela después de una mirada concienzuda a mi alrededor: «¿Esta es, pues, la trágica ciudad embrujada por fantasmas; este es el centro del vasto círculo sangriento, uno de los más sangrientos a lo largo de kilómetros y kilómetros a la redonda, en el horrendo catálogo antes mencionado?». Yo había contado con una suerte de conciencia registrada del pasado, y lo cierto era que allí no aparecía ninguna conciencia discernible, registrada o no, de nada. Richmond, en pocas palabras, me parecía simplemente hueco y vacío. Uno no podía aceptarlo: el descrédito en que caían los propios recursos perceptivos era intolerable. El gran hotel moderno, enorme sin necesidad, era espléndido, pero gozaba como elemento, como «valor», de una prioridad indiscutible. Era una inmensa tienda bien montada, lo último en tiendas, proclamando en el desierto el nombre de una nueva industria. El desierto, ya lo he mencionado, estaba más o menos cubierto de nieve que favorecía, lo reconozco, el vacío; el viento era fuerte, el cielo plomizo, las casas apenas resaltadas como casas; el «carácter sureño», en resumidas cuentas, brillaba por su ausencia. Sin duda debería haberme avergonzado de decir en qué términos concretos me había imaginado que residiría de forma natural, salvo en la medida en que he atribuido cierta virtud mística al nombre de Virginia; esta imputación instintiva constituye por sí misma un síntoma de cierta relevancia. Observé y esperé, dándole a la virtud la oportunidad de que aflorara; deambulé por todas partes, mientras el tiempo y la estación lo permitieron, pero los dos factores impidieron, con gran pesar mío, el acceso a los largos caminos para visitar los

campos de batalla. Las vistas llanas, las perspectivas amplias, eran de una lamentable sencillez como las caras de los ciegos. ¿Se trataba prácticamente de una pobre ciudad del Norte, deplorable idea donde las haya, con la diferencia de que una ciudad del Norte de esa extensión habría conseguido salir airosa, por destrozada que estuviera, gracias al talento norteño para aparentar recursos? ¿Dónde, por otra parte, estaban las «viejas mansiones sureñas», cuyas amplias terrazas y delicados jardines en hileras habían menospreciado tanto los recursos del Norte?

Apenas recuerdo en qué punto de mi peregrinación, en qué vaga esquina de una calle, sentí que mi investigación —hasta ese momento bastante embarazosa— se aclaraba y todo el panorama se situaba bajo una luz en la que la contemplación permitía hallar una justificación y una pista provisionales. En cualquier caso, me gusta revivir los últimos minutos en cuestión, por el alivio y la felicidad que supusieron. Recordándolos, veo que en mi decepción inicial el muelle había sido presionado por una fuerza positiva: una suerte de bancarrota intelectual que sentía que no me podía permitir. No había referencias; ese había sido el problema, pero la reacción vino acompañada de la sensación de que la grave y triste pobreza era en sí misma una referencia, y una por medio de la cual cien magníficas conexiones históricas se restablecieron en el acto con gran emoción. ¿Qué estaba saboreando yo, en aquel momento del día y con tal intensidad, si no las remotas consecuencias de las cosas, henchidas de majestuosidad por su peso y duración? Estaba saboreando, de forma mística, la esencia misma de la vieja idea del Sur: la más grande falacia, al revolotear hasta la visión retrógrada de uno, por la que cientos de miles de hombres habían dado sus vidas. Estaba saboreando la amargura del inmenso y grotesco proyecto frustrado: el proyecto, extravagante, fantástico y hoy patético en su locura, de un gran «estado esclavista» (como rezaba el viejo término) hábil y parsimoniosamente aislado en el mundo que tenía que contenerlo y comerciar con él. Eso era lo que todo lo que me rodeaba daba a entender: que ese disparate había florecido allí; y nada habría sido más interesante que el hecho de que una lección como esa siguiera siendo durante muchos años el rostro revelador de las cosas donde esos disparates habían florecido. Así, con un movimiento de la mano, o de la cabeza, se despertó el interés, de tal forma que a partir de ese momento nunca tuve que separarme de él. Iba a servir otra vez, iba a servir en otra parte, y de forma

idéntica. Al instante alteró todos los aspectos, y el piadoso peregrino volvió en sí. Él había deseado, su plan había requerido, que esa parte concreta del país fuera hermosa; necesitaba que lo fuera, no se podía permitir, por el debido respeto a la economía intelectual que se le había impuesto, que no fuera así. Por lo tanto, cuando las cosas eran solemnemente tristes —tristes a gran escala y con cierta nobleza de ruina—, siempre parecía garantizado un elemento de belleza, aunque uno no supiera por qué: qué verdad operaría de forma venturosa para el comprometido Sur.

Volvió otra vez —siempre estaba volviendo de esa manera, como para hacer que me repitiera exageradamente— a una reinterpretación dentro del panorama americano. El observador, cual inversor afectuoso, debe gastar con osadía e ingenio para que rinda; a menudo recuerda el maravilloso suelo de California, que no es nada cuando se abandona a sí mismo y al buen tiempo, pero se vuelve cualquier cosa imaginable bajo la lluvia. ¿Qué serían para él muchas perspectivas americanas, se pregunta con frecuencia el visitante empeñado en comprender, sin la descarga previa de una enérgica lluvia de ideas generales? La arena árida tiene la propiedad de absorber estas ideas y devolverlas al aire en forma de señales de vida proporcionadas. Por otra parte, hay jardines en flor, lo reconozco, donde el follaje del tiempo es demasiado denso para que la idea general penetre o se pose, como si ya hubiera implicadas demasiadas ideas generales y no hubiera nada que hacer salvo aceptar la demostración completa. En cualquier caso, no era a ese orden al que mi descifrable Sur debía pertenecer; pero Richmond al menos empezó a reembolsarme los gastos, del primero al último, tan pronto como surgieron los gastos. Era un lugar débil, «adorablemente» débil: esa era la palabra en la que desembocaba la impresión completa que tenía; esa era la idea que de forma evidente más clara se hacía en mi mente. Esa era la forma, en resumen, que adoptaba el interés; el encanto —inmenso, casi augusto— residía en las conexiones intactas del caso. Allí estaba la fuente principal de la belleza; si estar triste era lo contrario de ser descarado, ¿qué era la tristeza, considerada en todas partes, sino el regusto de la vanidad y la fatuidad originales, con los recuerdos y castigos de los que el aire todavía parecía cargado? Hacía poco había estado estudiando la crónica, leyendo, junto con otras cosas, el volumen de su admirable historia, en el que el señor James Ford Rhodes relata los largos prolegómenos de la guerra y nos muestra, con toda

lucidez y humanidad, la mente sureña de mediados de siglo en las convulsiones de su perversidad: la concepción, casi de por sí cómica, y que sin embargo iba a fracasar de forma trágica, de un mundo reordenado, un estado sólida y cómodamente sentado y arropado, con el fin de preservar el algodón producido por los esclavos.

La solidez y la comodidad tenían que implicar no solo la amplia extensión, sino también la completa consagración intelectual, moral y económica de la esclavitud, una aplicación ampliada y glorificada de su principio, y beatificada por completo. En todas partes, la luz de la experiencia y los hitos de la historia y de la ciencia política y espiritual de los que parecía lleno el escenario de la civilización tenían una sola advertencia que hacer cuando se les preguntaba, y parecían hacerla con un efecto muy despectivo, por medio del cual se imponía en el genio sureño la necesidad de librarse de esas discordias y sustituir el rostro irónico del mundo por una armonía totalmente nueva o, en otras palabras, un proyecto de crítica distinto. Puesto que no se podía decir nada para adaptar el proyecto esclavista —adaptarlo a la realidad de las cosas, claro está—, fueron el plan del cristianismo y la sabiduría de los años los que tendrían que modificarse. La historia, la historia de todo, sería reescrita *ad usum Delphini*: el delfín era en este caso la mente sureña en ciernes. Eso implicaba una cuarentena general y permanente; implicaba la eterna expurgación de libros y periódicos; implicaba, en resumidas cuentas, que toda la literatura y todo el arte acabasen en un índice expurgatorio. Implicaba, todavía más, una activa y ferviente propaganda; la reorganización de la escuela, la universidad, por el bien de la nueva crítica. El testimonio de esa tesis ofrecido por los documentos de la época, la legislación del estado, la elocuencia local, los discursos políticos, el «tono de la prensa», nos parece hoy desmesuradamente extraño, peculiar e ignorante: inocente por encima de todo; marcado con el inalienable signo sureño, el inimitable matiz rococó. Hablamos de lo provinciano, pero el provincianismo proyectado por el sueño confederado, y con el que se proponía impregnar a toda la indefensa masa social, parece a nuestros ojos actuales tan ingenuamente perverso, tan ajeno a la más mínima tradición intelectual de belleza o ingenio, como una colección de los extraños utensilios y divinidades de los solitarios y primitivos isleños exhibida en una exposición. Daba la impresión de que estaban allí, en el aire que habían respirado hasta los mejores sureños antiguos; y mirándolos por

encima del umbral de aproximación que el pobre Richmond parecía formar, comprendí que la clave de la sensación que transmitía su escenario autóctono estaba en la idea de su soledad y su aislamiento. De ese modo, se le antojaban a uno unas víctimas del destino tan pasivas y tan patéticas, tan explotadas y traicionadas, tan maltratadas y magulladas por la vieja carga de su condición, que me sorprendí tomando conciencia en su nombre de una suerte de ingenua ternura.

Del capítulo 14, «Florida»

Después de eso todo fue coser y cantar, en el sentido de tregua —temporal, al menos— en la especulación; de sentir que las impresiones entran en fila y se sientan con el silencio y el decoro de unos fieles (digamos, unas dulces señoras mayores con misales) tomando posesión de un larguísimo banco familiar. Tenía una opinión absurda de Savannah, basada en una pausa del tren de un cuarto de hora bajo el amplio arco de la estación, donde, en la ya confirmada insulsez del mediodía de domingo, apareció de repente un radiante y breve grupo matutino esperando a ser organizado. ¿Dónde estaba su encanto? Si no estaba ya en el aire, en la latitud, en la estación, así como en la imaginación del peregrino capaz no solo de extraer una impresión de la importante ciudad en esos términos sencillos y con esa economía desesperada, sino también de detectar sabe Dios qué episodio romántico en un simple asunto ferroviario. En Estados Unidos, un asunto ferroviario es que una estación parezca ceder en un momento dado a la invasión de una docena de muchachas vociferantes de cabeza descubierta acompañadas de muchachos, y que todos traten el lugar, bajo el ojo público, con los vagones atestados y contemplativos, como un terreno familiar, doméstico e íntimo, apartado, tal vez, para la discusión y regulación de sus intereses y negocios, y para la extraña ventilación inocentemente indecorosa de sus pueriles intimidades, ante las que el visitante moralizador tan a menudo se queda boquiabierto. Recuerdo mis fugaces instantes en Savannah como el sabor de una taza llena hasta el borde; recuerdo el enjambre de muchachas guapas sin sombrero, con sus coletas con grandes lazos, sus juguetones pretendientes, su inveterada insinuación de que tenían mucho más que decir

de las costumbres americanas que ninguna otra clase social; recuerdo la emoción producida por los vendedores ambulantes de cosas aromáticas del Sur, ramilletes y especímenes de flores y fruta que tal vez no fuesen el último exotismo, pero que eran autóctonos y frescos y carísimos, y por tanto todo lo que el viajero podía pedir.

Pero, sobre todo, creo que recuerdo la enérgica determinación a no ceder ante el ataque de las lindezas encintadas y ataviadas con blusa, a la provocación de sus insinuaciones, aunque había caído, hablando de un modo reflexivo, en la trampa que me habían tendido los viajantes de Charleston; una determinación tomada, me avergüenza decir, solo como vil precaución económica, y no porque el espectáculo ante el que me hallaba no hiciera que mis reflexiones se enjambrasen. Mis reflexiones reprimidas zumbaban como abejas alrededor de un parterre y hundían sus trompas hasta las corolas del tema. Si me hubiera tomado un tiempo antes de que el tren retomase el viaje, me habría sorprendido considerando a los jóvenes y a las señoritas —pero sobre todo, por múltiples razones, a las señoritas— unas criaturas extraordinariamente desconcertantes, al principio, en lo tocante a su conducta pública, pero cubiertas por el manto de la caridad en cuanto quedó claro que, como los viajantes pobres, de lo que adolecen es de la tragedia de su exposición social, su cruel exposición, la traición del destino que los ha mantenido tan fuera de lugar. Era un caso, advertí más que nunca, similar al de los viajantes; el caso de los viajantes alumbró, de forma muy interesante, parentesco y coincidencias. Si los viajantes me habían parecido monstruosos en su ocupación de la escena por su desproporcionada posesión de esta, ¿no bastaba para ver que eso también explicaba gran parte del efecto de la muchacha americana hallada a la deslumbrante luz de su publicidad, su estado sin corregir y sin relación? Mientras viajaba por el país, había habido momentos en que ella me había parecido, por la afirmación de su presencia, por su inmunidad a la competencia, digna de compartir terreno con el viajante, y digna de hablar como mi oído interno le había oído a él hablar.

«Ah, en cuanto me ubiques, verás: seré distinta, seré mejor. Como estoy, con mi ridícula "posición", seducida equivocadamente, abandonada cruelmente, expulsada en mi ignorancia y mi locura, ¿qué sé yo, una muchacha indefensa, sobre modales y buen tono, sobre proporción y perspectiva, sobre recato y misterio, sobre un estado de las cosas que implica, en interés y por gracia de la vida, formas de existencia distintas de

esta pobre mía: un junco penosamente roto, haciendo señales en medio del viento? ¿Cómo puedo estar a la altura de la gracia y el interés que se esperan de mí? Sí, literalmente todo el interés que no es simple interés monetario. Se espera que lo dé todo mientras vago y deambulo por el desierto. ¿Ha habido alguna vez una conspiración semejante por parte de toda una estructura social orientada a la denuncia de la incompetencia? ¿Han quedado alguna vez tan impunes la juventud y la presunción groseras con respecto a su peligro de delatarse? ¿Quién me ensombrece o me desahucia con tanto desprecio en todo momento? ¿Por qué combinación de otras presencias me veo desembarazada, relegada y obligada, devuelta, en una palabra, a mi relación con el conjunto? Lo único que quiero —es decir, lo único que necesito, pues tal vez haya una diferencia— es, hablando claro, que mis padres y mis hermanos y mis primos consientan en existir sin caer en lo oculto, lo incomprobable o, supongo que podría decirse, lo irresponsable. Ese es el problema, sí, pero si nosotras lo aceptamos, ¿por qué ellos no? El resto —¿no lo entiendes?— surgiría por sí solo. ¿Acaso no he estado suficiente tiempo abandonada y no he sido suficientemente traicionada? ¿No es demasiado tarde, y no estoy prácticamente perdida?»

De manera débil y desde la lejanía, como a través de densas intervenciones, este lamento inquisitivo de la conciencia angustiada de la señorita pareció llegar hasta mí, pero yo había endurecido mi juicio, como ya he dicho, para no asimilarlo, y no hice más que aguantarlo pensativamente otra vez hasta que me mostró el orden social americano bajo la apariencia de una gran e inexpresiva madre desnaturalizada, un compuesto de todos los individuos cobardes que no se han adaptado al nombre, cuyo oído nunca ha penetrado la mística queja, y cuya gran complacencia ciega hacía pensar en un enorme monumento cubierto con la gruesa tela que precede a una inauguración pública. Nos hacemos preguntas ante el mármol o el bronce ocultos; presuponemos, bajo la tela, una actitud o una expresión adecuada a la imagen; pero como la extracción de la tela se aplaza de manera permanente, el carácter nunca aparece. De acuerdo con esta analogía, la madre americana, envuelta en su tela marrón, no ha aparecido; solo la hija está sentada mientras tanto para que el mundo la inspeccione, al pie del pedestal, soportando hipotéticamente un peso, una masa u otra, y por su postura, podemos atribuirle el aspecto que juzgamos que más le conviene.

NOTAS

1. Carta a William James, 14 de febrero de 1885, en Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James. Letters*, 4 vols., Londres, Macmillan, 1974-1984, vol. III, p. 203 (en adelante, *Letters*). Al final de su carrera de escritor, en 1915, James describió *Las bostonianas* en otros términos: «En aquel entonces me pareció que tal vez fuese una notable proeza de objetividad, pero nunca quedé del todo contento con ella, y recuerdo que, después de lanzarme a escribirla, algo engañado, el tema y el material me resultaron menos interesantes de lo que me había figurado» (*Letters*, vol. IV, p. 778).

2. Philip Horne, ed., *Henry James. A Life in Letters*, Londres, Allen Lane, 1999, pp. 463-464.

3. Datar la acción de *Las bostonianas* no es fácil, aunque podemos determinar que tiene lugar durante dos años entre mediados y finales de la década de 1870.

4. La triste historia de las ventas de James se relata en Roger Gard, ed., *Henry James. The Critical Heritage*, Londres, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968, apéndice 2. También contiene reseñas contemporáneas de *Las bostonianas* y de *La princesa Casamassima*.

5. Uno de los problemas de *La princesa Casamassima* es la incapacidad de James para gestionar su relación con el más importante de todos los novelistas de Londres, Charles Dickens, y en concreto con *Grandes esperanzas* (1861); está llena de momentos subdickensianos, sobre todo cuando intenta ser graciosa. Por el contrario, la señorita Birdseye de *Las bostonianas* es una variación totalmente lograda y pertinente de la excéntrica y despistada señorita Flite de *La casa lúgubre* (1853).

6. Véase Henry James, *The Critical Muse. Selected Literary Criticism*, Roger Gard, ed., Londres, Penguin, 1987, p. 75.

7. Prólogo de *La musa trágica* (1890), en Gard, ed., *The Critical Muse*, p. 530.

8. *Letters*, vol. IV, p. 619.

9. Prólogo de *Los tesoros de Poynton* (1897), en Gard, ed., *The Critical Muse*, p. 530.

10. Véase Leon Edel y Lyall H. Powers, eds., *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, Nueva York, Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 18-20.

11. En 1876 James conoció en París a Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897) y a otros novelistas franceses llamados de forma poco precisa «naturalistas», y visitó otra vez al círculo en 1884, durante la gestación de *Las bostonianas*. «No hay nada que me interese más hoy día que los esfuerzos y experimentos de ese pequeño grupo —escribió a su compañero novelista William Dean Howells— con su inteligencia verdaderamente infernal para el arte, la forma y el método […] Los torrentes de jabón y agua tibios que están siendo vomitados en Inglaterra bajo el nombre de novelas me parece, por contraste, que le hacen un flaco favor a nuestra raza» (*Letters*, vol. III, p. 28). Cuando dijo (*Letters*, vol. III, p. 36) que estaba «a favor del *roman d'analyse*» —la novela analítica—, estaba pensando en los naturalistas y en su costumbre de llevar a cabo una investigación social directa. Las dos declaraciones guardan relación con lo que intentaría hacer en *Las bostonianas*. Pero *La evangelista* (1883) no es precisamente la típica novela naturalista,

considerando que es un estudio psicológico de las malsanas relaciones personales entre una chica danesa y una mujer mayor francesa que la convence para que abandone a su madre y se vaya de aventura religiosa.

12. Carta a Grace Norton, 3 de diciembre de 1884, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 53. Las convicciones artísticas de James sobre la novela fueron expresadas públicamente por primera vez en un importante ensayo, *El arte de la ficción*, publicado dos meses antes de que escribiera esta carta, y en la época en que empezó a trabajar en *Las bostonianas* en agosto de 1884.

13. Prólogo de *Los tesoros de Poynton*, *op. cit.*, pp. 529-530.

14. Graham Burns, «The Bostonians», *Critical Review*, 12, 1969, pp. 45-46.

15. Hay una larga serie de jóvenes inocentes en la obra de ficción de James: ejemplos especialmente importantes son las heroínas de *Daisy Miller* (1878) y *Lo que Maisie sabía* (1897), Nanda Brookenham en *La edad ingrata* (1899) y Milly Theale en *Las alas de la paloma* (1902). Sin embargo, Verena está considerablemente menos idealizada que sus hermanas en la ficción, y una de las funciones más importantes de la señora Luna en la novela es minarla en ese sentido. «Una *poseuse* de quinta categoría», la llama en el capítulo XL. «Era una zorrita astuta, y le preocupaban tanto los derechos de las mujeres», opina la señora Luna (capítulo XXII), «como a ella el Canal de Panamá; el único derecho femenino que deseaba era el de subirse encima de algo para que los hombres pudieran admirarla.» De modo que resulta irónico que, de entre todas las mujeres, sea a la señora Luna a la que Verena quisiera parecerse (capítulo XIV).

16. El trasfondo histórico de *Las bostonianas*, en concreto las campañas feministas de las décadas de 1870 y 1880 relacionadas con los derechos electorales de las mujeres, etc., es tratado por Sara de Saussure Davies, «Feminist Sources in *The Bostonians*», *American Literature*, 50, 1979, pp. 570-587. Davis revela que una popular y atractiva oradora de la época, Anna Dickinson (1842-1932), fue objeto de defensa no solo una sino dos veces: primero durante la precampaña para la Convención de los Derechos de las Mujeres de 1866, por la feminista Susan Brownell Anthony (1820-1906) y por el abolicionista y conferenciante bostoniano Wendell Phillips (1811-1884); y segundo durante la campaña presidencial de 1872, por Anthony de nuevo y por el escritor y periodista Whitelaw Reid (1837-1912), quien se fogueó informando desde el Sur durante la Reconstrucción. La relación entre Dickinson y Anthony fue muy intensa, y el nombre de Reid se asoció románticamente con el de la joven oradora, que había iniciado su carrera a los diecisiete años. A los pocos años de la campaña de 1872, Dickinson había desaparecido casi por completo del panorama público, mientras que Anthony —«de rasgos duros, candorosa, fría como un témpano, desenvuelta y filosófica», según una crónica periodística citada por Daves— se había aficionado a dar conferencias y había logrado un éxito considerable. Para otros referentes de la vida real, véase Robert Emmet Long, «A Source for Dr Mary Prance», *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 19, junio de 1964, pp. 87-88, y Howard Kerr, *Mediums, and Spirit-Rappers, and Roaring Radicals. Spiritualism in American Literature*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1972, pp. 190-222.

17. Carta a William James, 13 de junio de 1886, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 121.

18. Véase Leon Edel, *The Life of Henry James*, 2 vols., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1977, vol. I, p. 180 (en adelante, Edel, *Life*).

19. Wilkinson James sirvió como ayudante del coronel Shaw en un célebre regimiento del Norte, el 54 de Massachusetts, famoso porque estaba compuesto por voluntarios negros. Se trata del regimiento de «infantería de acampanadas mejillas de Negros / en el tembloroso relieve de la Guerra Civil de St. Gauden» de uno de los mejores poemas de Robert Lowell, «Por los muertos de la Unión», otra evocación y meditación profunda sobre el papel histórico de Boston como conciencia moral de Estados Unidos. «Wilky» fue herido de gravedad en Gettysburg. Robertson James sirvió en el regimiento 55 de Massachusetts y fue nombrado capitán por su heroísmo. (Véase Edel,

Life, vol. II, pp. 155-159.) Con el tiempo, el hermano mayor del novelista, William, inauguró el monumento conmemorativo a Shaw creado por Saint-Gaudens.

20. Edel, *Life*, vol. I, p. 290.

21. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *La granja de Blithedale*, Tony Tanner y John Dugdale, eds., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 95.

22. Joseph Slater, ed., *The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, Nueva York, Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 283.

23. Entre los títulos que James consideró para *Las bostonianas* se encontraba «Las reformadoras» (véase Edel y Powers, eds., *Complete Notebooks*, p. 30).

24. La orientación sexual de James —homosexual, heterosexual o simplemente célibe— sigue siendo desconocida. Sin embargo, Edel relata una anécdota según la cual el joven Hugh Walpole se insinuó a James, quien respondió: «No puedo, no puedo» (*Life*, vol. II, p. 694, y también en los capítulos 50 y 98). El relato tardío de James «La bestia en la jungla» ha sido considerado una alegoría o un drama sobre la salida del armario: véase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Londres, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

25. Horne, *op. cit.*, p. 478.

26. Véase, por el contrario, la escapada de Ransom y Verena a Central Park en el capítulo XXXIII: «Esa mañana podía detenerse y mirar todo lo que quisiera, y saciar todas sus curiosidades, hasta las más infantiles; se sentía como si fuera a pasar al aire libre todo el día, aunque no fuera así». Ransom insiste en que, como la ha sacado a pasear, «le debía la compensación de ver que se alimentaba como era debido».

27. F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Londres, Chatto & Windus, 1948, p. 178.

* Alexis de Tocqueville, «La influencia social de la democracia», *La democracia en América*, libro II, cuarta parte, capítulo 6.

* Henry James, *The American Scene*, John F. Sears, ed., Londres, Penguin, 1994, pp. 119-124, 182-189, 271-276, 316-318.

Henry James (Nueva York, 1843-Londres, 1916) nació en el seno de una adinerada y culta familia de origen irlandés. Recibió una educación ecléctica y cosmopolita, que se desarrolló mayoritariamente en Europa. En 1875 se estableció en Inglaterra después de publicar en Estados Unidos sus primeros relatos. El conflicto entre la cultura europea y la estadounidense está en el centro de muchas de sus obras, desde su primera novela, *Roderick Hudson* (1875), hasta la trilogía con la cual culmina su carrera: *Las alas de la paloma* (1902), *Los embajadores* (1903) y *La copa dorada* (1904). Maestro de la novela breve, algunos de sus logros más celebrados se hallan en este género: *Otra vuelta de tuerca* (1898), *En la jaula* (1898) o *Los periódicos* (1903). Cerca del final de su vida se nacionalizó inglés. En palabras de Gore Vidal, «no había nada que James hiciera como un inglés, ni tampoco como un estadounidense. Él mismo era su gran realidad, un nuevo mundo, una *terra incognita* cuyo mapa tardaría el resto de sus días en trazar para todos nosotros».

Richard Lansdown es catedrático en la Universidad James Cook en Cairns, Australia. Es autor de *Byron's Historical Dramas* (1992) y *The Autonomy of Literature* (2000), así como editor de la publicación *Critical Review.*

Sergio Pitol (1933) nació en Puebla (México). Diplomático, escritor y traductor de autores como Henry James, Jane Austen, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad o Witold Gombrowicz. Entre sus obras destacan los libros de relatos *No hay tal lugar*, *Infierno de todos*, *Los climas*, *Nocturno de Bujara* (Premio Xavier Villaurrutia 1981), *Cementerio de tordos* (Premio Latinoamericano de Narrativa Colima 1982) y *Vals de Mefisto*, así como los ensayos *El arte de la fuga* (Premio Mazatlán de Literatura 1997) y *La pasión por la trama*, y las novelas *El desfile del amor* (Premio Herralde 1984), *Juegos florales* (1985), *El tañido de una flauta* (1986), *Domar a la divina garza* (1988) y *La vida conyugal* (1991). En 2005 fue galardonado con el Premio Cervantes, merecido reconocimiento a su trayectoria.

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